

NEW

# FALL *OF* BERLIN

HOW THE ALLIES' BRUTAL  
AND BLOODY OFFENSIVE BROUGHT  
AN END TO THE WAR IN EUROPE

INSIDE  
INCREDIBLE  
IMAGES, IN-  
DEPTH STORIES  
& DETAILED  
BATTLE MAPS

## HITLER'S DEMISE

THE DOWNFALL OF NAZI GERMANY AND  
HISTORY'S MOST INFAMOUS DICTATOR

## STALINGRAD SIEGE

HOW THE SOVIETS WENT FROM THE  
BRINK TO TURN THE TIDE OF THE WAR

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FIRST TO TAKE THE GERMAN CAPITAL

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**HISTORY  
WAR**









# WELCOME

**W**ith his plans crumbling around him in March 1945, Hitler now faced inevitable defeat. The combined might of the Allied forces stood on the banks of the Rhine and set their sights on the German capital of Berlin.

Meanwhile, on the Eastern Front, the Russians and Germans fought in some of the bloodiest battles of the entire war. The last few months of fighting cost tens of thousands of people their lives, and changed the course of world history as the Führer's terrible schemes finally came to dust.







# FALL OF BERLIN

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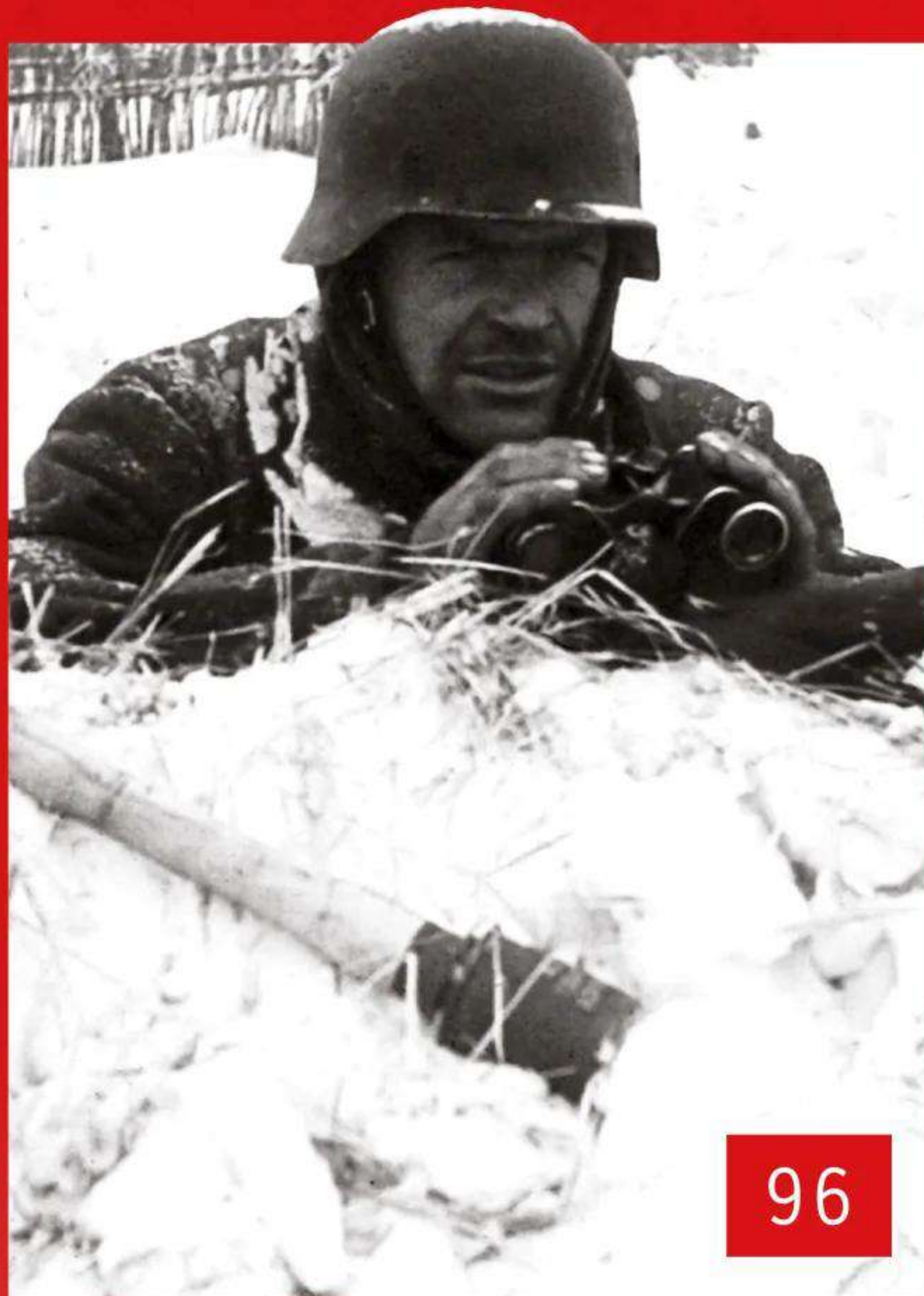
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# THE END IN SIGHT

THE ARDENNES OFFENSIVE IN DECEMBER 1944 AND JANUARY 1945 WAS ADOLF HITLER'S LAST CHANCE TO CRUSH THE ADVANCE OF THE WESTERN ALLIES IN EUROPE...



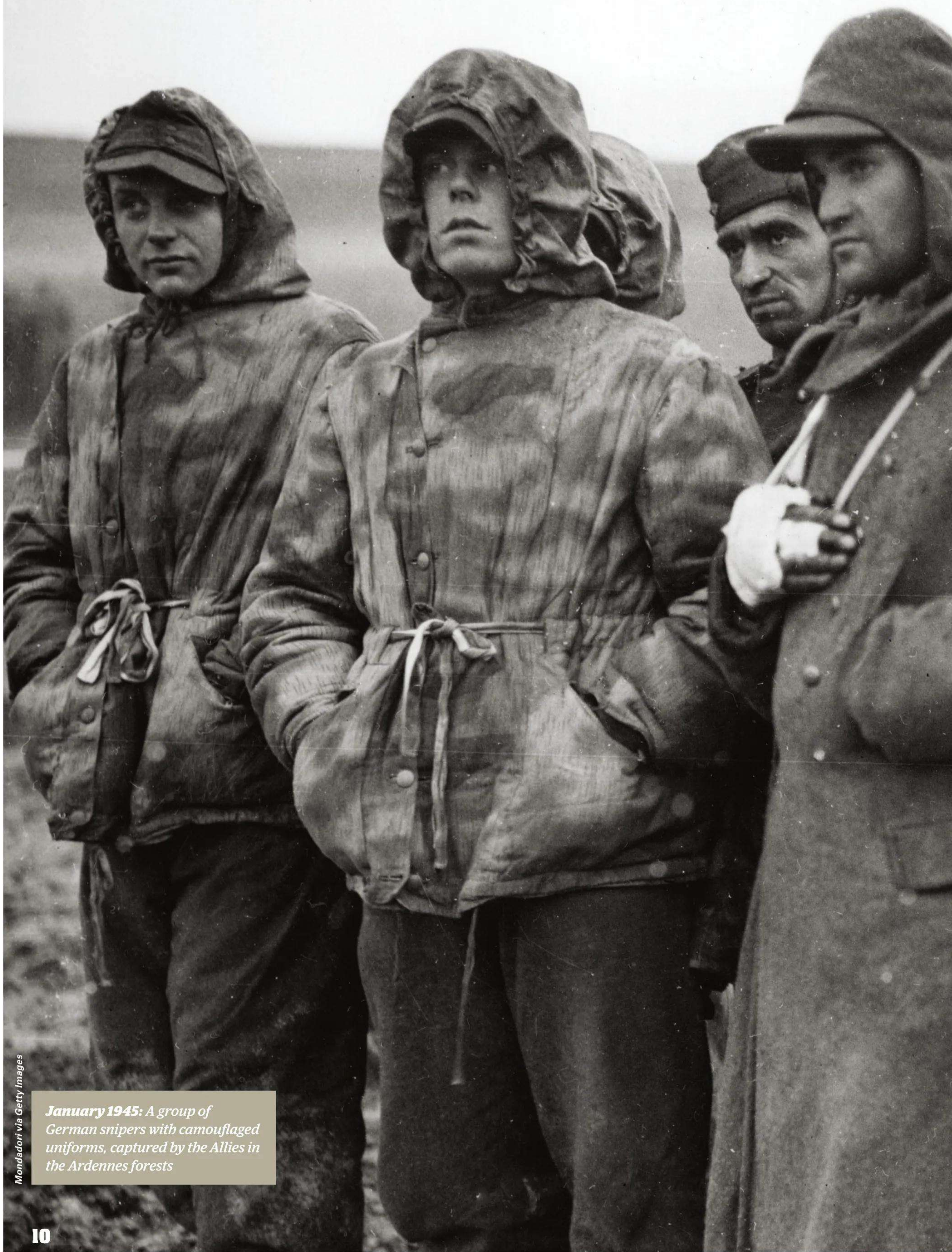
**December 1944:** Infantry moving towards their objective over a snow-covered field near Krinkelter, Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge







## INTRODUCTION



**January 1945:** A group of German snipers with camouflaged uniforms, captured by the Allies in the Ardennes forests



THOUGH DELIVERING A SEVERE BLOW TO THE FORCES OF THE USA AND GREAT BRITAIN IN TERMS OF CASUALTIES, THE LOSS OF THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE MEANT THAT OVERALL DEFEAT WAS NOW INEVITABLE...

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## INTRODUCTION

**March 1945:** Troops of the US 9th Army use Roebling Alligator amphibious vehicles to cross the Rhine under cover of a smokescreen





AS THE DUST SETTLED,  
ALLIED EYES AGAIN  
TURNED TO INVADING  
THE GERMAN HOMELAND.  
THERE WAS JUST ONE  
THING THAT STOOD IN  
THEIR WAY: THE MIGHTY  
RIVER RHINE. ■

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# PLANS FOR THE FINAL PUSH

AS THE GERMAN FORCES  
PREPARED TO DEFEND  
BERLIN, THE ALLIES WERE  
MAKING THEIR OWN  
PREPARATIONS...

**W**hether it took weeks, months or even years, there was no chance the Wehrmacht could hold onto the Fatherland from the ever-encroaching Red Army of the Soviet Union to the east and the Allies on its Western border. However, before Supreme Commander General Dwight Eisenhower and his armies could invade Germany, they had to cross one more barrier: the Rhine.

Long held as a geographical and psychological border to Germany, fording the huge river presented a massive task for Eisenhower. The Allies had already failed to cross it during Operation Market

*Continued on page 18 ►*







**Inspection:** Winston Churchill, Montgomery, General William Hood Simpson and General William Shaffer Key on a US landing craft

Mondadori via Getty Images







***Under fire:** An American mortar crew shells German positions across the Rhine in Bacharach, Germany, 24 March 1945. The men are from the 2nd Battalion, 417th Regiment, 76th Division & US 3rd Army*



## INTRODUCTION

*Continued from page 14*

Garden in September 1944, when they came up one bridge short during Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's daring plan to enter Germany through Holland and finish the war by Christmas. After its failure, the British, Americans and the League of Nations that fought alongside them, had moved south on a broad front strategy. Gradually, they pushed the Germans back through Eastern France, Belgium and the Rhineland until the bloody, hellish winter onslaught at the Ardennes had temporarily halted their progress.

The last time an invading commander had crossed the Rhine had been Napoleon Bonaparte in 1805. While his skills could hardly be compared to managing the logistical and political behemoth that was the Allied force in north-west Europe, Eisenhower's broad, conservative strategy did little to put him in the same league as the brilliant, flamboyant emperor who had successfully swept across the continent 140 years before.

In fact, even with the faster, more destructive weapons and tactics that had defined the war up to this point, Eisenhower was fearfully hesitant. He had daring generals, such as George Patton and Omar Bradley, who were more than capable of taking the fight to the heart of Germany, but Eisenhower's main priority was avoiding part of his force breaking ranks, forging ahead and being isolated and destroyed by the dreaded German Panzer and Airborne divisions. Although they were on the back foot, the Allied leader and his men still feared the capability of the German soldiers, as the defeats in Holland and initial thrust at the Ardennes had demonstrated.

The German blitzkrieg against Poland, France and Russia in the early years of the conflict had radically changed warfare, relying on speed, cooperation of different units, and above all mastering the art of

thrusts and pincer movements that had overwhelmed entire armies of defenders.

Although effective, there was the danger that such rapid advances could result in the attackers being cut off from counterattacks to the flanks, and it was this that Eisenhower wished to avoid. However, to break the barrier of the river a risky approach was needed.

The responsibility for crossing the Rhine was again given to Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, the commander of 21st Army Group that contained the British and Canadian forces on the left flank of the Western Front. Despite being hailed as a hero among the British for his success at the vital Battle of El Alamein, which had turned the tide of the war in the North African desert, he was generally disliked and distrusted by Eisenhower's American subordinates, whose patience with the diminutive Monty was severely tested.

The General's daring, but failed, plan to cross the Rhine during Market Garden had cost the lives of many men, and the Americans were annoyed about Montgomery's repeated attempts to keep the British Army at the spearhead of the advance on Germany. He constantly argued about Eisenhower's tactics, insisted he be given another chance to crack the German line, and took credit for helping win the Battle of the Bulge despite British forces' vital but limited involvement.

Although Britain had been admirably fighting Hitler's forces since the beginning of the European war, by January 1945 Eisenhower's army was overwhelmingly an American one, with Bradley and Devers' 12th and 6th Army Groups lined up along the middle and south of the frontline contributing the majority of men and machines to the campaign. There was a general feeling among them that the valiant, experienced but ultimately bruised British formations were running out of steam after such a long struggle.

### LOW MORALE

This was only half the story, however. While many British troops were tired of the endless fighting they'd been subjected to since 1939, so too were their American allies who had been exposed to the superiority of their German foes. As Major General James Gavin remarked of his troops' limitations after the war, "Our American army individually means well and tries hard, but it is not the army one reads about in the press... It lacks courage and élan." While this may seem a harsh judgement, with the end in sight men

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THE GERMANS  
HAD MADE THE  
ALLIES PAY FOR  
EVERY SQUARE  
MILE OF LAND  
SINCE NORMANDY  
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were becoming increasingly reluctant to continue the fight and lose their lives in the process. Increasing numbers were deemed too ill to fight and there was an alarming increase in the number of self-inflicted wounds and trench foot, a "convenient alternative to combat fatigue", among units who were sick of the ferocious fighting against German foes that refused to give up their country without a fight. Morale was dented when it became clear that any other army would have surrendered by now, knowing that all was lost. Unfortunately, while Hitler remained alive and hell-bent on prolonging the suffering, troops on both sides realised the fighting must continue.

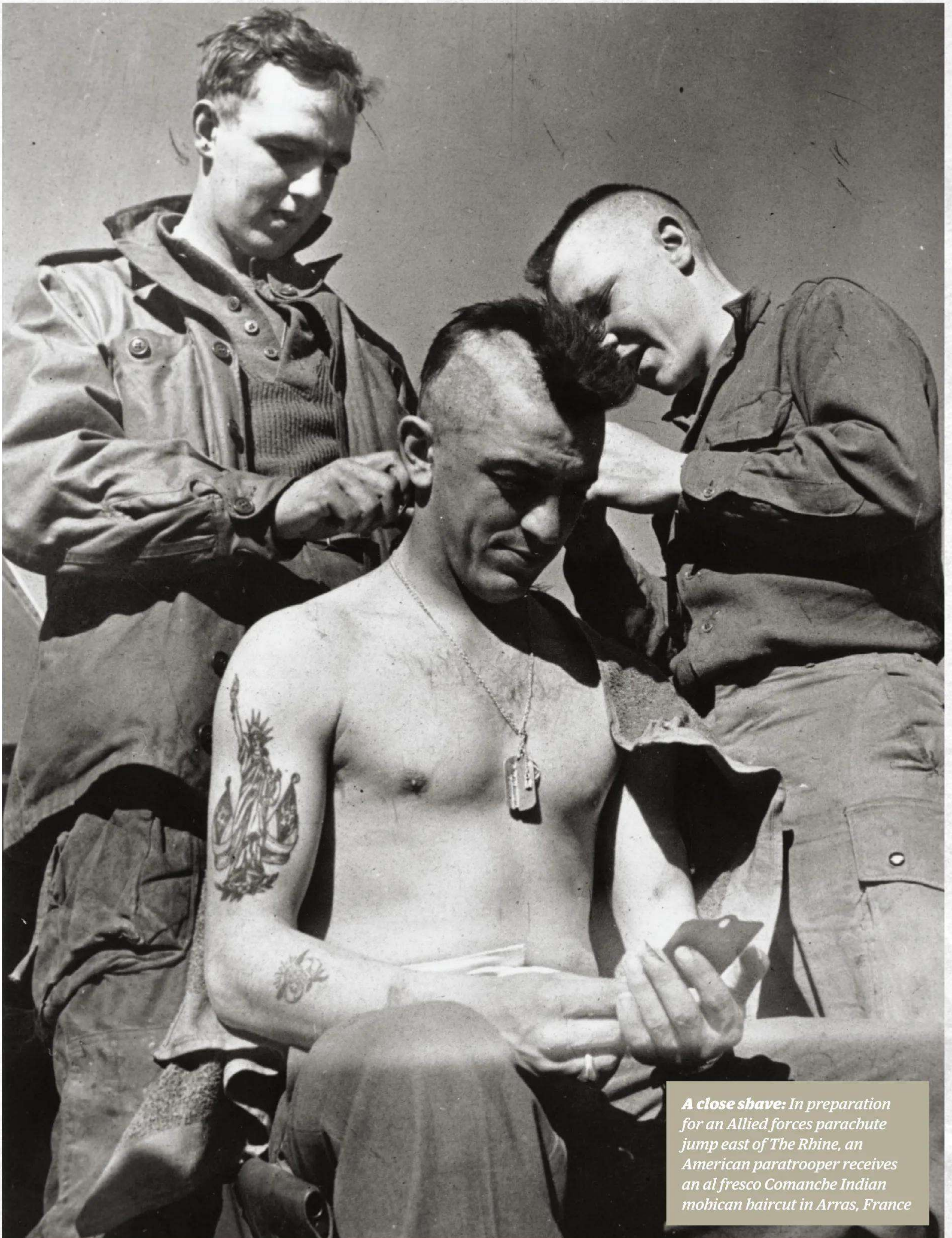
The German armies that opposed Eisenhower had earned their reputation as some of the most fearsome in history, more capable than their adversaries and backed by superior weapons in the Panzer and Tiger tanks that inflicted such crushing losses on the Allied Sherman and Churchill models. It was a testament to their skills that with almost no air force left, limited armour and against vastly superior numbers, the Germans had made the Allies pay for every square mile of land since Normandy.

Although many were sick of the fighting, their depleted ranks were being swelled by old men and fanatical young boys of the Hitler Youth in the Volkssturm, who despite lacking fighting experience and often the weapons to turn the tide, added an intimidating new zeal to the famed units standing either side of the Rhine.

Under no illusion about the challenge still awaiting the Allies, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill urged Montgomery and his men to one last push to cross the final obstacle between Britain, America and their allies and the end of a conflict that had brought untold suffering to the world and cost the lives of tens of millions. ■

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WITH THE END IN  
SIGHT MEN WERE  
RELUCTANT  
TO CONTINUE THE  
FIGHT AND LOSE  
THEIR LIVES  
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***A close shave:** In preparation for an Allied forces parachute jump east of The Rhine, an American paratrooper receives an al fresco Comanche Indian mobican haircut in Arras, France*

Robert Capa/Getty Images



# RIVER

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**Dark water:** Soldiers of the 7th crossing the Rhine in the region of Mannheim on boats protected by smoke and artificial rain



# ASSAULT

**F**ield Marshal Montgomery had formulated his plan to cross the Rhine by the end of November 1944, with the campaign delayed until 1945 due to the ferocious fighting from Bradley's 12th and Montgomery's 21st Army Groups to contain the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes.

Such was the impact of the Battle of the Bulge that, at one stage, Eisenhower couldn't foresee crossing the Rhine until May 1945. As it happened, it wasn't until the end of January that the Allies could begin their march on the Rhine. ■

**22** REACHING THE RHINE

**34** THE REMAGEN BRIDGEHEAD

**38** OPERATION PLUNDER

**52** OPERATION FLASHPOINT

**62** OPERATION VARSITY





# REACHING THE RHINE

BEFORE CROSSING THE RIVER, ALLIED TROOPS HAD TO  
ENDURE SOME OF THE FIERCEST FIGHTS SEEN IN EUROPE

**M**ontgomery's plan would call for a concentrated build up of artillery and infantry on the northern flank of the Allied advance to make the crossing. The aim was to seize the vital Ruhr valley – the last remaining industrial centre for Germany following the capture of Silesia and the Saar.

The Ruhr was in fact so valuable and vital to the German war machine that following Germany's failure to pay reparations after the WWI Treaty of Versailles, French troops invaded the economically rich area in 1923 to claim the debt it was owed. With German supplies and production of munitions already on its knees following years of aerial bombing, it was hoped the seizure of the Ruhr may just lead the Nazi high command to accept that the war was lost. Montgomery's 21st Army Group, which also had command of General Bill Simpson's US 9th Army – much to the fury of General Bradley – would take the northern flank of the crossing, while 12th Army Group would take the south, near Cologne.

## MAKING PLANS

Montgomery's meticulous nature came to the fore as he envisaged a detailed plan that he hoped would mirror the Normandy landings but on a smaller scale. Several hours of intense bombardment from the Allied shore would precede the night-time crossings by the infantry, whose build up would be protected by a field of smoke. The men in the boats would also be accompanied by the amphibious Sherman DD tanks that had suffered so terribly in the rough Channel during the early hours of D-Day. To help secure the bridgehead and strategic points on the enemy shore, a daring daylight drop of airborne and glider troops would take place, against the norm of paratroopers being dropped before the major infantry thrust.

However, in order for Montgomery's river crossings to take place, the 250-mile long Allied front had to adhere to Eisenhower's broad strategy and slog its way forward through the Rhineland to the west bank of the Rhine. In the Allies' way were weakened but formidable German Panzer and parachute units that held the northern section of the Siegfried Line. Also known as the West Wall, this great series of fortified positions had been constructed during the 1930s opposite the massive French Maginot Line of forts. They had been built to keep the German army from invading France for the second time in a century, but it ultimately failed when the Germans simply bypassed it to the north. When Market Garden had failed, 200,000 slave labourers had been brought in to improve this imposing line's defences, which would inevitably have to be manned by some inexperienced troops. Many were from the German navy and air forces, who now had little else to contribute to the war effort given how few ships and planes the Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe had left.

On 8 February Operation Veritable was launched through the Reichswald Forest, which lay between the Rhine and Maas rivers in order to flank the Siegfried Line. It was the job of the Canadian First Army, under General Harry Crerar, to storm the Forest. With little room for armour that was also subject to ambushes, the ►

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MONTGOMERY HAD  
A PLAN HE HOPED  
WOULD MIRROR  
THE NORMANDY  
LANDINGS  
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**Allied armour:** Churchill tanks and other vehicles at the start of Operation Veritable, 8 February 1945

IWM via Getty Images



## RIVER ASSAULT

men had to fight their way past crack paratroopers who were well dug-in across a succession of defensive lines and the towns of Udem and Goch. There was also little let up from the horrendously cold winter, as waves of freezing rain added to the misery heaped on the troops as they desperately fought for every clearing against some of the toughest troops in the Wehrmacht. Sir Alan Brooke even reported to Montgomery how resolute the enemy were, stating, "Many of the enemy paratroops refuse to surrender even when they have run out of ammunition and have to be shot." One was even discovered alone, still firing his machine gun, missing his jaw and surrounded by his dead comrades. Brigadier Essame later summed Veritable up by stating it was "28 days and nights in almost unspeakable conditions of flood, mud and misery. The troops were soaked with almost incessant rain; there was no escaping it and no shelter. We met the First Parachute Army, the last remaining German indoctrinated youth fighting with undiminished courage."

### TOUGH PROGRESS

The beacons of hope came from the vast artillery build-up Montgomery had organised, which was able to pummel defences and negate German tanks, while the overwhelming Allied air superiority made its force felt when there was a break in the weather. This proved to be a double-edged sword, however, when the RAF accidentally dropped over 1,300 tons of high explosives on the city of Cleve instead of setting it ablaze. Rubble and craters littered the city and just as the Allies had found on occasions such as Caen in Normandy, this became perfect terrain for the Germans to defend, having to be cleared out street by street, ruined house by ruined house, and room by room. Again, the fighting at the head of the advance was appalling, with heavy casualties on both sides.

To the south of the Anglo-Canadian assault, the US First Army under Hodges advanced on a ten-mile front south of the Roer Dams and through the Eifel woods towards Cologne. Its assault over the Sauer highlighted the danger of what would lie ahead on the Rhine, as the melting snow swelled the river into a treacherous surge that claimed the lives of many men as their boats were swamped and swiftly-constructed bridges were swept away. The horrors of the river and the German defences on the enemy

*Continued on page 30 ►*







**Firing into the night:** British 5.5 guns fire during preparations for the crossing of the Rhine - the greatest artillery barrage of the war

Popperfoto/Getty Images



# BREACHING THE REICH

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HAVING BEEN DELAYED FOR TWO WEEKS DUE TO THE GERMANS DELIBERATELY FLOODING THE ROER RIVER, US TROOPS OF THE NINTH ARMY PREPARE TO INITIATE OPERATION GRENADE ON 23 FEBRUARY 1945, SIGNALLING THE ALLIED INVASION OF NAZI GERMANY FROM THE WEST. SEEN HERE HAULING AN ASSAULT RAFT UP TO THE WATER'S EDGE, THESE COMBAT ENGINEERS FORMED PART OF AN INITIAL INVASION FORCE OF 380,000 MEN. ■

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# PATTON PUSHES ON

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US SOLDIERS BELONGING TO THE THIRD ARMY WORK TO CONNECT STEEL GIRDERS AND FORM A CRUCIAL BRIDGE OVER THE ROER RIVER. LED BY THE INDEFATIGABLE GENERAL GEORGE S PATTON, THE US THIRD ARMY PLAYED A CRUCIAL ROLE IN THE CONQUEST OF GERMANY, AND BY THE WAR'S END IT HAD INFLICTED APPROXIMATELY 1.4 MILLION ENEMY LOSSES, INCLUDING OVER 47,000 KILLED AND 115,700 WOUNDED. ■

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## RIVER ASSAULT

*Continued from page 24*

shore stopped men in their tracks. Many refused to move, tried to avoid the fighting by becoming stretcher bearers and often had to be forced into boats by the gun barrels of their officers and NCOs. Private Sheppard reflected that, "Some guys actually thought it was easier to die than go on." Despite the difficulties the Sauer was in American hands by 9 February.

The same day the First also took control of the Roer Dams. There had been some fears that the German forces would destroy the imposing structures, but although they were taken intact, millions of gallons of water had been let through to flood the valley below, which halted any attempt made to relieve the gruelling Anglo-Canadian advance.

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THE HORRORS OF  
THE GERMAN  
DEFENCES ON THE  
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Two weeks into the fight, when these flooded plains were sufficiently drained, Simpson's 9th Army to the south launched Operation Grenade over the River Roer on 23 February to help their 21st Army Group neighbours reach the Rhine. A massive 45-minute bombardment came before six divisions made a surprise assault over the river. Again the crossings were to prove a dark omen for the Rhine, with boats swept downstream by fierce currents, while the waterlogged ground made for a slow advance and made floundering tanks easy targets for the defenders

On 3 March the US 35th Division met up with the 53rd Welsh Division at Geldern, and eventually on 10 March the first troops of 21st Army Group reached the west bank of the Rhine. With the initiative on their side, Simpson was adamant that the crossing should be made immediately before the Germans had time to reorganise a defence on the opposing shore. However, with exhausted troops and memories of Market Garden perhaps still troubling him, Montgomery refused. This was to be his operation, his chance to prove to the



Americans his worth, and he would leave nothing to chance.

The fighting was acknowledged by both Eisenhower and Montgomery to be among the most pitifully brutal of the entire war, with over 15,000 casualties inflicted by General Schlemm's troops' vicious defence. However, for every

casualty suffered by the numerically superior Allies, the beleaguered defenders lost three in the retreat. What's more the Germans' valuable armour, though taking its toll on the Allies' tanks, was often used ineffectively or not at all, due to the fact that there was often no fuel, ammunition or even men to operate





***Gunning for the enemy: The US Field Artillery regiment load a 240mm shell into a Howitzer firing at targets across the Rhine***

them. In one case a new delivery of tanks to the 12th Panzers was destroyed due to the fact there was no fuel to drive the vehicles anywhere. An officer of the 41st Volkssturm Battalion summed up the situation best by asking: “What can a Volkssturm man do with a rifle without any ammunition?”

Men on both sides couldn’t believe why the remaining German units left weren’t pulled back to the east of the Rhine to make use of the river’s formidable natural defence. The reason for the absurd blunder was Hitler’s refusal to take one step back. Losing ground to both the Western Allies and Soviets, the Führer,

now in the grip of a furious paranoia, was making more threats and demands on his commanders to not give up any more ground. Just as had happened to hundreds of thousands of Stalin’s Red Army soldiers in the first months of Operation Barbarossa, men were being needlessly lost instead of being rapidly withdrawn to better defensive positions.

The structure of the High Command, which meant every major decision could only be made with Hitler’s approval, had cost the German army severely in several battles, not least Normandy, where reinforcements that could have attacked the troops on the beaches as soon as they arrived were held back due to the whims of Hitler. The same top-down command

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THE FÜHRER, NOW  
IN THE GRIP OF A  
FURIOUS PARANOIA,  
WAS MAKING MORE  
THREATS AND  
DEMANDS ON HIS  
COMMANDERS  
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was now stifling the German commanders who watched on helplessly as their divisions were pulverised in the meat grinder of the Rhineland. As the First Parachute Army General Schlemm explained, “It was obvious that I no longer had a free hand in the conduct of the defence. My orders were that under no circumstances was any land between the Maas and the Rhine to be given up without permission of the Commander in Chief West, von Rundstedt, who in turn had to ask Hitler. For every withdrawal I was forced to make due to an Allied attack I had to send back a detailed explanation.”

It was this inflexible strategy that meant the remnants of the Wehrmacht divisions were being wasted with their backs to the one definitive barrier left they could feasibly defend. Even in the face of being overrun, Hitler ordered that every bridge over the Rhine be destroyed, with any commander who allowed his to be taken executed. Given Hitler’s attitude towards him, it’s unsurprising that Schlemm remarked, “Since I have nine bridges in my army sector, I could see my hopes of a long life rapidly dwindling.” ►



## RIVER ASSAULT

As the Allies encroached further towards the Rhine, and with their families and homes seemingly so close, German determination began to crack. Some commanders allowed their troops to slip away, with many eager to protect their loved ones in the inevitable rout of their homeland. Though there were no mass desertions, groups of mainly novice troops began to surrender when the best opportunity presented itself, realising that it was probably better to survive in the hands of the British and Americans than get killed or suffer the wrath of the Soviets.

Many were simply so exhausted and malnourished that they welcomed an American meal with open arms. One was so astonished by his first decent portions in weeks that he commented “with food and beverages of that quality and quantity we could have conquered the world”.

### OPERATION LUMBERJACK

Further south General George Patton's Third Army was 80 miles from the Rhine when it began its advance, as part of Operation Lumberjack, which demonstrated how swift the Allied advance could be if the shackles were removed from the generals.

In typical fashion the charismatic leader led his troops forward in the most aggressive and decisive push the Allies had seen since their first months in France. He himself waved his units forward on the roads while under enemy fire, leading John Eisenhower to observe, “There was something a bit scary about Patton. To pretend to love war as much as he did there had to have been a screw loose somewhere.”

Whatever was behind his actions, the Third responded by pushing ever-forward towards Germany, with the 4th Armoured Division covering 25 miles in one swoop across the Palatinate region to take them to the hills overlooking their quarry.

By the time Hitler allowed his commanders to finally pull back from the east bank his forces were in tatters. Tens of thousands were dead, hundreds of thousands were prisoners, and the great Panzer divisions that had been the scourge of Europe since 1939 were now held together by untrained old men and boys, a few battle-hardened troops on their last legs and a few tanks. Preparations were made to blow the remaining bridges to deny the Allies any easy passage, however, to the south the rapid American advance was about to take the Germans completely by surprise. ■

***On the move:** US Infantry near the town of Colmer make the muddy push towards the Rhine*









# THE REMAGEN BRIDGEHEAD

LUCK AND BOLD ATTACKS  
WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR  
TWO SURPRISE ASSAULTS  
MADE OVER THE RHINE

**O**n 7 March, the 9th Armoured Division advanced towards Remagen, where the Ludendorff railway bridge crossed the Rhine. To the amazement of the leading American troops, the colossal structure, which under Hitler's orders should have been demolished along with every other bridge across the Rhine, was still intact. Looking on at 1300 the 9th commander could hardly believe his eyes when he saw Germans still retreating over the wooden planking laid down to ease the passing of vehicles. ►

WITH JUST MINUTES  
TO SPARE, A  
SECTION OF THE  
27TH ARMoured  
INFANTRY RUSHED  
THE BRIDGE AND  
WAS MET BY  
GERMAN DEFENDERS







**Firepower:** Allied troops position an anti-aircraft battery on the west bank of the Remagen Bridge. A stronghold had been established on the east bank by 11 March

Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images



He was sure the bridge was primed to be demolished, which would present grave risks to his men if it was blown during an assault, however, it was a piece of information from a local civilian that convinced him, after a few hours of deliberation, to ignore the cautious order to advance and stop at the Rhine and take matters into his own hands. The rumour that the bridge was to be demolished at 1600 meant that he had little time to organise an assault.

With just minutes to spare, a section of the 27th Armoured Infantry rushed the bridge and was met by German defenders still positioned in the towers. Suddenly a large explosion silenced the small arms fire, with hopes crushed as the bridge had seemingly been obliterated. However, as the smoke cleared the bridge was miraculously still standing. Lieutenant Karl Timmermann took only seconds to resume his attack, with engineers following his lead and cutting every wire they found, in case a second attempt to blow the bridge proved to be more effective.

Within minutes the Americans were across the bridge, and after securing the eastern shore more men and tanks joined to implausibly create a bridgehead across the Rhine. Instead of a massive operation, the seemingly impenetrable river had been breached in a matter of minutes by a stroke of luck and some good old fashioned gallantry to exploit the situation.

### HOLDING THE BRIDGEHEAD

Though the taking of the Ludendorff Bridge was a major coup for the Allies, especially the Americans who felt they were being left out of the prestigious crossing going ahead to the north, the result was to have little military significance. Unfortunately for the brave men who made the dash across, the land on the eastern shore wasn't suitable for

PATTON WANTED TO  
POUR COLD WATER  
OVER HIS RIVAL  
MONTGOMERY'S  
PLANS BY CROSSING  
THE RHINE

large-scale operations, without a major prize such as the Ruhr or a major city within striking distance

Though 9th Armoured Division quickly rushed more men and armour across the bridge, with 8,000 over within 24 hours, General Harold Bull broke the news to Bradley that despite the achievement, this was the wrong place to cross. Unsurprisingly Bradley was furious and went above Bull to Eisenhower, who agreed that Bradley should hold onto the bridgehead at all costs, despite Bull's persistence that the bridge could actually facilitate a counterattack from the Germans.

### THE BRIDGE COLLAPSES

For the next six days the mini bridgehead on the east bank of the Rhine continued to grow, with traffic jams emerging as men and vehicles streamed across until such a time when the engineers decided it was strong enough to repel a counterattack itself, so that the bridge could be closed in order to be repaired from the initial blast. This proved to be unexpectedly fortunate timing, as just two days later the battered bridge collapsed, sealing the bridgehead off. Though this makeshift assault had little effect on the rest of the Rhine Crossing, as it wasn't used to stage another assault into enemy territory, it crucially drew away German defenders who could have been used against the main crossings planned further north – they were rushed down to prevent any breakout. However, this wasn't the only unplanned crossing of the Rhine.

### PATTON'S PLAN

On the night of 22 March, 24 hours before Montgomery's elaborate plan was put into action, just south of Frankfurt, Third Army's 5th Division, under orders from General Patton dashed across the Rhine in boats, barely suffering a loss. The fact that this was of little strategic importance didn't interest Patton. He had no intention of starting a new spearhead to reach Berlin from this position or inflict the final hammer blow on the beleaguered Wehrmacht. He simply wanted to pour cold water over his rival Montgomery's plans by showing how easy a crossing over the supposedly impenetrable Rhine could be. In fact, he could barely contain his childish joy as he telephoned Omar Bradley to deliver the news stating: "Brad – don't tell anyone, but I'm across... I sneaked a

THE FIGHTING  
DURING THE  
ADVANCE ON THE  
RHINE HAD COST  
THE GERMANS  
SEVERELY,  
LEAVING ONLY  
100 DEFENDERS  
PER KILOMETRE  
OF FRONT

division over last night. But there are so few Krauts around that they don't know it yet. So don't make any announcements. We'll keep it a secret and see how it goes."

How it went was, in fact, so good that it wasn't long until Patton telephoned his commander again saying "Brad, for God's sake tell the world we are across. We knocked down 33 Krauts [Luftwaffe planes] today when they came after our pontoon bridges. I want the world to know Third Army made it before Monty." Patton added that his crossing had been achieved, "without the benefit of aerial bombing, ground smoke, artillery preparation and airborne assistance".

Montgomery would employ all of these in a dramatic scale to make sure the northern flank was across in great numbers, and with as few casualties as possible in order to spearhead the final advance into the heart of Germany.

The loss of the bridge at Remagen was Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt's final failure. He was sacked by Hitler for the second time since the Normandy invasion. His replacement was Albert Kesselring, who despite having stifled the Allies' advance in Italy, was now put in the unenviable position of halting the Allies again.

He and the rest of his army knew they would only be able to delay the inevitable. The fighting during the advance on the Rhine had cost the Germans severely, leaving only 100 defenders per kilometre of front. Low morale was infecting the ranks like a virus. The German forces knew full well the war was lost, for on the western bank of the Rhine, Montgomery was preparing to unleash the assault... ■



CROSS THE RHINE WITH DRY FEET  
COURTESY OF 9<sup>TH</sup> ARM'D DIV.

**Bridge to victory:** A military policeman of the 9th Armored Division, 1st US Army, reads an American sign placed on the Rhine river bridge

UIG via Getty Images



# OPERATION PLUNDER

## MONTGOMERY ARRANGED A METICULOUS PLAN FOR THE NIGHT-TIME CROSSINGS OVER THE RHINE...

**M**ontgomery's elaborate plan for what he called Operation Plunder left nothing to chance. Though a bridgehead on the far bank had been quickly seized, he wanted no repeats of Market Garden, where men had been stranded and at the mercy of the German Panzer divisions.

Though there was much teasing from the Americans who scoffed at the colossal build-up of men and arms for the operation when their own troops were picnicking on the eastern bank of the Rhine further south, Montgomery was resolute that the crossing would be meticulously prepared for, with back-up plans and reserves to quickly establish a secure bridgehead on the opposite bank that could quickly continue the advance into Germany.

The area chosen for the assault across the Rhine was between Emmerich to the north and Dinslaken to the south, with the all-important town of Wesel in the centre. Though the US 9th Army wasn't originally included in the plan, the affable Simpson and British Lt General Dempsey argued with Montgomery that the Americans that he had been so eager to have under his control should be utilised. From north to south the crossings would be made by the 51st (Highland) Division at Rees, 15th (Scottish) Division at Haffen, British 1st Commando and US 30th in a pincer movement either side of Wesel, and the US 79th at Dinslaken, each roughly an hour apart.

As well as eliminating pockets of resistance the attackers were to occupy the roads and two railway lines to stop the limited German reinforcements from making any of the substantial counterattacks that the Allied commanders so feared.

Once the night-time assaults had been completed the orders were then to be given for the audacious daylight paratrooper drop by the British 6th Airborne and US 17th north of Wesel. Their job was to link up the separate bridgeheads into an

imposing 8x8km invasion area, from which to establish the final Allied surge deep into the heart of Germany.

However, with a daytime raid came great risk for the men involved. While it would certainly take the enemy by surprise, the aircraft and men jumping would be easy targets for fire from the ground, while others thought that the drop was too close to the river to give enough support to the river assault. Many argued it was essentially a dangerous, limited distraction. On the other hand it would also give the Allies the advantage of getting some of their best units in the thick of the fighting against their German enemies, doing what they did best, and not being held back in the hard grind of the crossing.

While all of this was happening and reinforcements and supplies were to be sent across, tens of thousands of combat engineers would be building bridges to accelerate the build-up of formations and crucially armour on the eastern shore.

There was a precision to the timetables used for Operation Plunder, but given the disasters that had happened at both Omaha Beach on D-Day and reaching Arnhem during Market Garden when detailed plans were torn to pieces, there was also a degree of flexibility in order to avoid confusion, traffic jams and ►

THE AREA CHOSEN FOR THE ASSAULT ACROSS THE RHINE WAS BETWEEN EMMERICH AND DINSLAKEN, WITH THE TOWN OF WESEL IN THE CENTRE







**Crossing the Rhine:** Men of the 15th Scottish Division leave their assault craft and double up the east bank to their assembly point near Xanten

IWM via Getty Images



## RIVER ASSAULT

**Heavy load:** American Army tank transporter being used to haul Navy LCM landing craft to the Rhine







men being sent straight into the fiercest fighting when they would be better suited being sent to another sector.

Finally, after months of planning, seeing off German counterattacks and the hard fighting during the march towards the Rhine, Montgomery was poised to prove his worth to his American comrades, beginning with the huge artillery bombardment that was to precede Operation Plunder. The sheer scale and build-up of forces astounded Lt Peter White of the 52nd (Lowland) Division who commented that: "I was struck anew by the rapidly massing material for the river crossing... Guns and materials speckled the landscape as it had once been sprinkled with cattle. The hedgerows were lined and the barns bursting with supplies and ammunition... and massed in other areas were Buffaloes and DUKW amphibious vehicles and fantastic quantities of bridging materials." For ten whole days this build-up was camouflaged from the enemy using an elaborate smokescreen. Though this usually indicated something important was happening that needed to be hidden, the Germans had neither the tools or firepower to strike a decisive blow on the area.

### OPENING BARRAGE

At 18.00 hours on 23 March the massive stockpile of shells was unleashed from hundreds of artillery pieces to soften up the defenders on the eastern shore. Even those who had survived Normandy and the Ardennes offensive were amazed at the sheer ferocity of the bombardment that lasted for six hours. Major Martin Lindsay of the 1st Gordons observed that: "There was a continuous ripple of slams and bangs as all our guns, stretching across so many fields behind, were firing for hours."

While the guns blazed, the scene on the western shore was a hive of activity as men had their last issue of tea, rum and sandwiches before they scrambled into their boats. Major Lindsay said: "I shall always remember the scene in the loading area; the massive bulk of the men in Buffaloes; the long ghostly files of men marching up to them, their flickering shadows... a few busy figures darting here and there in the moonlight directing people into this and that Buffalo." At 22.00 the first Buffalo boats drove slowly into the water on the northern edge of the front, carrying men of the 51st (Highland) Division towards Rees. These tracked landing vehicles (LVTs) were essentially small tanks that could lumber up out of the river onto the banks

to deliver the troops without having to unload them into the water.

Under the cover of darkness and with the fog of smoke and cordite "hanging low over the area resembling a London fog" according to Captain Cameron of the 154th, it took just two minutes to cross almost unopposed. Either the surprise had worked or Patton had been correct in his assumption that the Rhine was in fact easy to traverse. Trooper Walter Fuller, who drove one of the unfamiliar Buffaloes carrying the Highlanders, remembered: "It was pitch black as we led our vehicles into the water, we couldn't see and had no idea what to expect, other than that being the first unit over the Rhine no doubt meant resistance would be heavy. It was an extremely nerve-wracking crossing... after a while we realised that in fact there was next to no resistance and our crossing was all but unopposed."

The first casualties were caused by anti-personnel mines that the troops ran into on the shore. Despite this, at 22.06, the commanders of the two lead battalions reported that they were successfully on the far shore, moving quickly inland after encountering only limited resistance. According to Captain Stafford, "Up to this time enemy fire had been negligible. The first companies passed over many positions whose garrisons were still dazed; as the succeeding companies reached them they were just coming to life." Within no time the 7th Black Watch and 7th Argylls had secured their objectives, allowing the third crossing of the 154th to follow them across the Rhine at 22.30.

It was when the Highlanders moved into the villages of Kleinesserden and Esserden that the German defence started to stop them in their tracks. Meanwhile, the 5th/7th Gordon Highlanders became stuck behind a small backwater, and ended up pinned down on an island, unable to reach Rees for the rest of the day. Its official history recounted how, "The Gordons were ►

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## RIVER ASSAULT

certainly in possession of the island, but they spent an uneasy time upon it. From the higher ground snipers and machine gunners commanded the whole expanse of open land; all movement outside the various farm buildings drew fire."

The assault on Rees itself was left to the 1st Gordons, who managed to cross the Rhine without a single casualty, and without losing its newly acquired and valuable 3.7inch howitzers. With this extra force they methodically moved through the outskirts of the town towards the heavily defended church in the centre. Major Lindsay described the intense fighting needed to succeed in urban warfare of this kind, saying, "The clearing of every single house was a separate little military operation requiring a special reconnaissance, plan and execution. And the enemy were resisting fiercely all the time."

As the night progressed problems began to arise, with anti-tank ditches, stiff German defences and broken down boats slowing the troops. However, with the first thrust now over the river without great concern these minor setbacks were of little consequence. One issue that was ingeniously taken care of was that when the amphibious Sherman DDs couldn't get up a steep bank, an armoured bulldozer was able to cleave a clearing on the bank to allow the Shermans to get stuck into the fighting.

The second crossing was made by the 1st Commando Brigade, which was to attack Wesel. It managed to create even more confusion among the defenders on the far bank. As Brigadier Mills-Roberts acknowledged of the formidable task ahead: "I saw the town of Wesel, with the tall spires of several churches. It was going to be difficult to marshal our 1,600 men for the crossing without being observed." In order to give some time for the main force as it was loaded into the Buffaloes, men of 6 Commando 2km downstream started up the engines of their more basic, noisy stormboats in an attempt to draw enemy fire. After the lead boats slipped through almost unannounced with the loss of only one boat, the stormboats began their crossing. Though they had helped their fellow Commandos, the men in the slower, noisy boats were easily picked off in the darkness or even broke down, with scores of men having to be rescued by lifeboats. Colonel Lewis recalled the tragedy of one boat that was full of men and went into the water too quickly with tragic consequences, as men were dragged underwater by their packs. *Continued on page 46 ►*





**Enemy territory:** British troops in Rees, Germany after crossing the Rhine









# FORDING THE RHINE

SITTING ATOP AN AMPHIBIOUS VEHICLE, US TROOPS OF THE NINTH ARMY LEAD THEIR COMRADES ACROSS A PONTOON BRIDGE BUILT OVER THE RIVER RHINE. DESPITE MEETING POCKETS OF RESISTANCE FROM THE 1ST PARACHUTE ARMY, BETWEEN 23 AND 27 MARCH THE NINTH ARMY AND THE BRITISH 2ND ARMY NAVIGATED THE LAST NATURAL DEFENCE BETWEEN THEM AND BERLIN. ■







**Watchful eyes:** British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, U.S. General Dwight David Eisenhower and British Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery watching the crossing of the Rhine

*Continued from page 42*

### HEAVY BOMBARDMENT

Those who did make it moved through towards Wesel ready to make the assault, just before it was levelled. Despite the problems encountered by Caen and Cleve being destroyed by bombing, creating natural barricades for defenders, over 1,000 tons of bombs were dropped by RAF Lancasters just in front of the advancing Commandos at 22.30. Brigadier Mills-Roberts observed the 200 Lancasters mammoth aerial onslaught. "As the bombs dropped, showers of debris flew into the air accompanied by great banks of fire. The noise was colossal and the ground shook under us although we were 1,000 yards away. The whole plain was illuminated by a red, lurid glow". As the Commandos moved into the town not only were they met by the German 180th Division who they'd assumed had all been killed, but reinforcements were

also rushed towards Wesel to ensure the vital road network wasn't lost, including an artillery bombardment of the landing zone. One Commando was surprised to encounter such stiff resistance, saying: "Despite the heavy bombing the Germans were alert and came out of the cellars to fight with a courage and perseverance, which did them credit." The fighting was ferocious, especially around the wire factory where a number of Germans with the feared handheld Panzerfaust anti-tank device inflicted some casualties. Lt Bryan Samain of 45 Commando observed one apparently dead German rise to his feet and fire his Panzerfaust into the oncoming troops which killed two and injured a colonel. "We emptied a magazine of Tommy gun bullets into the German soldier, and every subsequent 'corpse' we saw lying around." Luckily this resistance was all too little too late from the beleaguered defenders, with the elite Commandos quickly encircling

the Germans and pushing them to the southern edge of the town against the Lippe river. Not only were they skilled in the close quarter battle used to clear out buildings, but the Commandos were also very adept at locating enemy tanks and relaying coordinates for the artillery to take them out from across the water. While the remaining resistance was being mopped up, the British

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"THE NOISE WAS  
COLOSSAL AND THE  
GROUND SHOOK  
UNDER US."

BRIGADIER MILLS-ROBERTS  
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***Taking a break:***  
*DUKW crews rest by*  
*the roadside east of the*  
*Rhine on 25 March 1945*



waited for reinforcements from the airborne landings.

The 15th (Scottish) didn't embark until 02:00, with an extra four hours of concentrated artillery fire softening up their landing zone across the river. Though there were again casualties from mines and even friendly fire, various units managed to clear the vital 3km of riverbank that stretched from Rees and Wesel and the town of Lohr, to allow the engineers to begin building the bridges that would be so crucial in ensuring the success of the exploitation of the crossing bridgehead. Luckily for the 15th Scottish regiment, the traditional sound of the

bagpipes that gave the men spirit going into battle, yet also alerted the enemy to their presence, were conspicuously missing from the 6th Royal Scot Fusiliers. BBC reporter Wynford Vaughn Thomas, who crossed with them, observed that the piper delivered an "agonised wailing from his instrument", before he cried and exclaimed "Ma pipes, man, they'll no play". A number of villages including Bislich and Vissel were quickly seized, however, further downstream the 10th Highland Light Infantry ran into difficulties when successive waves landed in the wrong places and came up against paratroopers who made them

pay for their inaccuracy. Similarly to the Germans gathering every last man to the fighting, Ron James was one of the former RAF servicemen who assembled to fill the gap left in the thin British lines and was now experiencing his first combat situation in the village of Mehr, where the Germans soon gave up after limited fighting. He observed that: "The village was a mess having been smashed up by our artillery and it was very difficult to spot the enemy in the confusion of blown down trees and rubble... The paratroopers fought well but if they didn't have an officer or NCO with them they surrendered pretty quickly." ■



# A WEAKENED FOE

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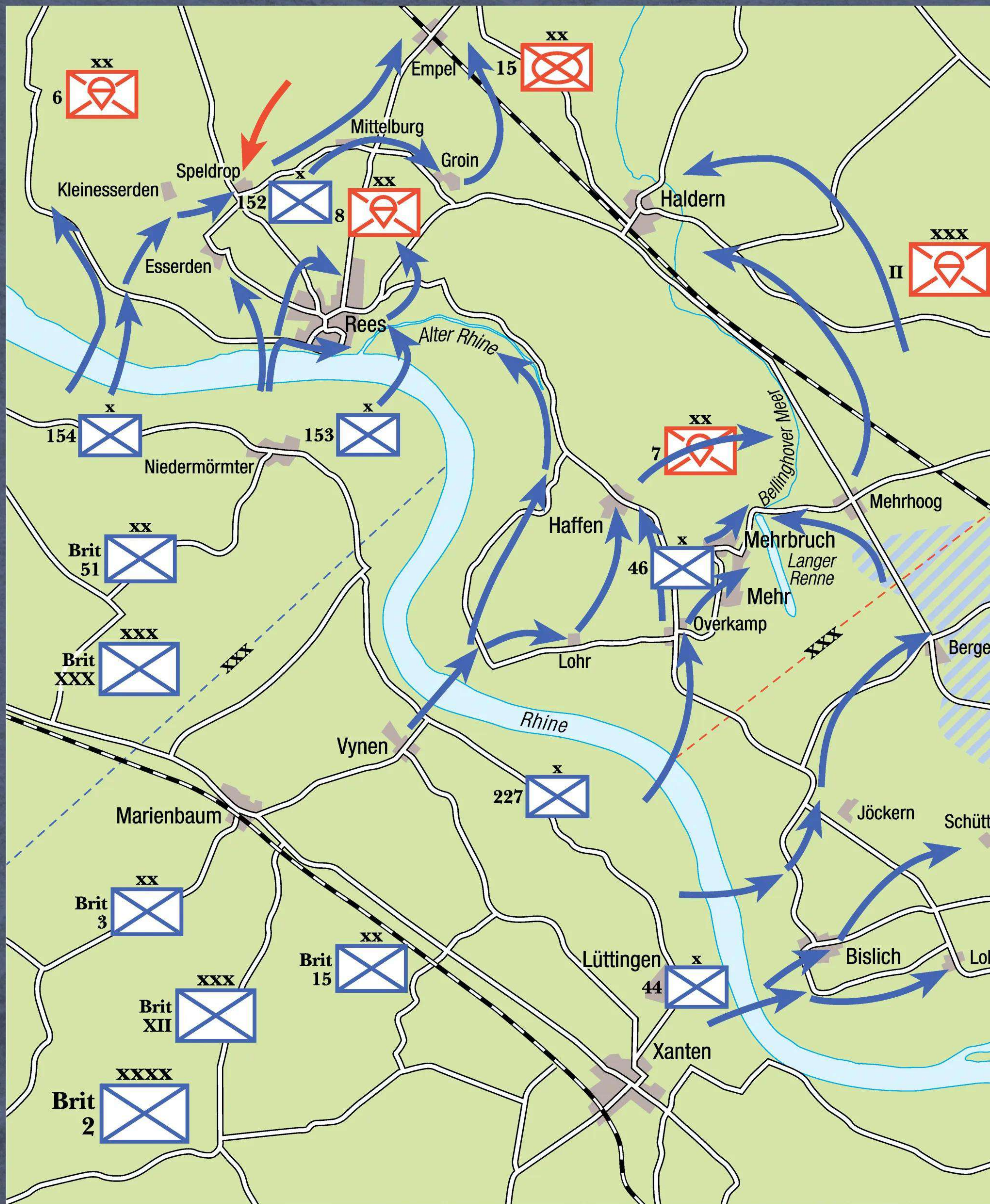
INDICATING JUST HOW DIRE THE SITUATION WAS BECOMING FOR GERMANY'S DEFENDERS BY LATE MARCH OF 1945, BRITISH PRIME MINISTER WINSTON CHURCHILL AND A PARTY OF AMERICAN COMMANDERS WERE ABLE TO SAFELY CROSS THE RHINE AND STEP OFF ONTO ENEMY-HELD TERRITORY ON THE OPPOSITE BANK WITHOUT A SINGLE BULLET BEING FIRED IN THEIR DIRECTION. ■

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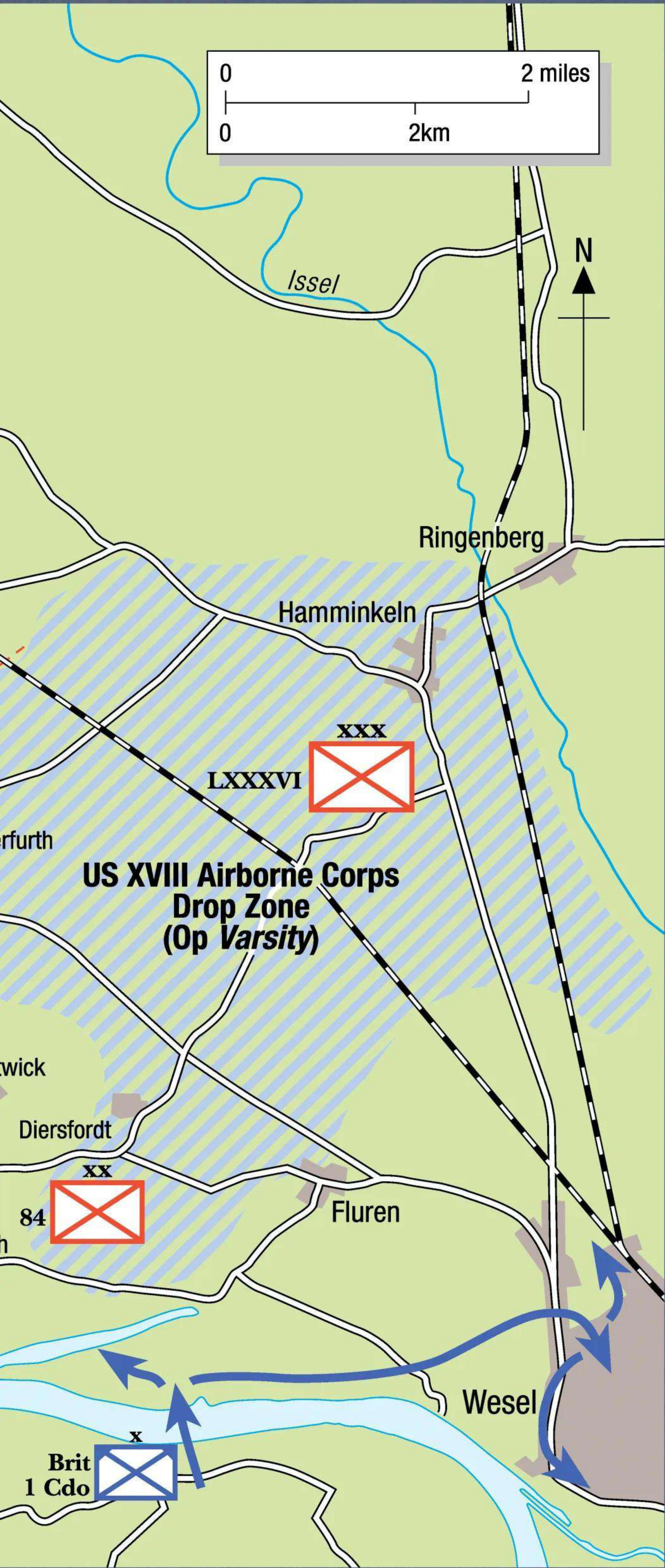












MAP KEY

xxxx	xxx
ARMY	CORPS
xx	x
DIVISION	BRIGADE
ARMOUR	INFANTRY
PARACHUTE	

KEY TO  
UNITS

UNIT IDENTIFIER		PARENT UNIT COMMANDER
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**Crossing the river:** Operation Plunder was the daring and successful Allied plan to cross the Rhine and take the fighting into the heart of Germany



# OPERATION FLASHPOINT

## THE US NINTH ARMY'S CROSSING WAS GIVEN ITS OWN DISTINCTIVE CODENAME: OPERATION FLASHPOINT

**T**he lead units of the US assault would come from the XVI Corps. Although the more inexperienced of the forces under General Simpson's command, it had performed well in Operation Grenade in the previous weeks, and standing at 120,000 men strong the Corps was the most numerous. Its sector would be south of the Lieppe Canal to the south of Wesel, covering a large meander in the Rhine and several towns including Spellen, Voerde, Dinslaken and Walsum.

In order to soften up the defences, one of the concentrated accumulations of artillery seen on the Western Front was assembled, consisting of 54 artillery battalions and 1,000 heavy bombers that would smash German batteries, machine gun posts, fuel dumps and the vital lines of communication that the Germans needed to rush reinforcements to wherever the attack fell.

Three hours into Plunder the American guns opened up, delivering a devastating, uninterrupted barrage that lasted until 10.00am on 24 March. At its height seven shells a second were being poured onto the eastern bank, with over 130,000 falling over the nine hours.

Just as it started the troops of the XVI Corps moved forward to the bank of the river, seeing the pummelling artillery display in all its glory. Just before they were due to embark at 2.00am, the troops crammed into stormboats that could carry seven men each, with the appalling sounds of battle around them, shrouded in darkness and smoke.

The noisy boats offered no protection, and as they started the dash across the water, nerves got the better of some men as they vomited over the side. Though only lasting a few minutes the crossing seemed like an eternity, with tracer fire

and explosions in the water adding to the terror, especially as two unfortunate craft were hit by mortar bombs.

Some boats had to endure more than others, as was the case with Bill Robertson: "My most vivid memory of WWII was crossing the Rhine... four days after my 19th birthday... We were halfway across when our tracks locked and we went around in a circle and drifted. We all thought we were going to have to jump or swim for it, but at the last minute the tracks started up again."

Mercilessly the crash of the bank soon signalled that they had made it to the opposite shore, and the men scrambled out of the boats into the smoky remains of where their supporting barrage had been raining down shells just seconds before.

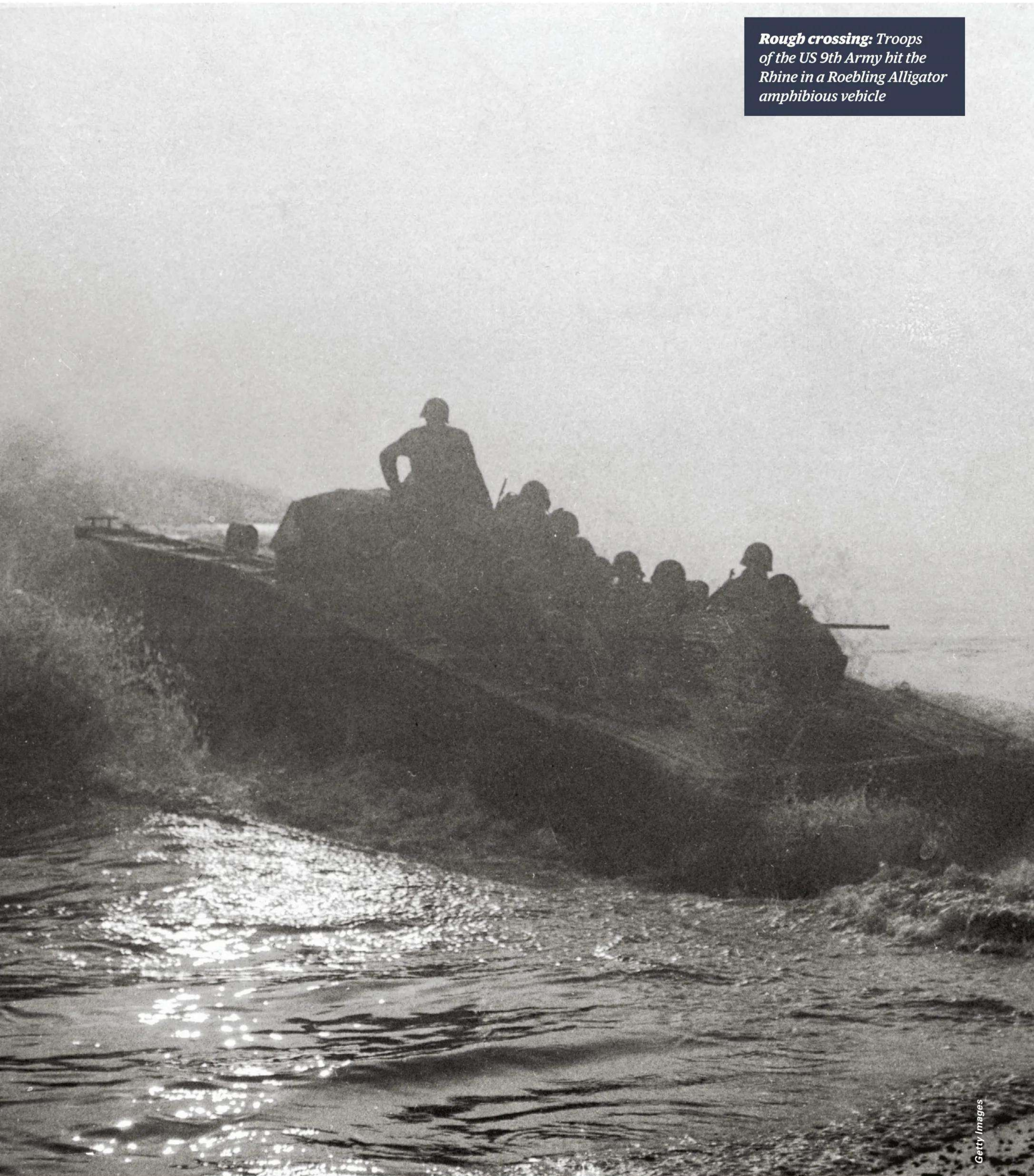
White hot burning phosphorus was lit to indicate to the artillery that the troops had made it and to aim further inland to avoid impeding their advance.

The northern flank of Flashpoint was the responsibility of the 30th Division, which made its move south of Wesel, taking advantage of the fact the Germans in the area had been involved in a brutal firefight for the town since the British ►

THE NOISY BOATS  
OFFERED NO  
PROTECTION, AND  
AS THEY STARTED  
THE DASH ACROSS  
THE WATER, NERVES  
GOT THE BETTER  
OF SOME MEN



***Rough crossing:*** Troops of the US 9th Army hit the Rhine in a Roebling Alligator amphibious vehicle





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THE 120TH  
FOLLOWED A BEND  
IN THE RHINE TO  
SEIZE NOT ONLY  
MÖLLEN BUT BOTH  
THE VITAL  
RAILWAY LINES  
EITHER SIDE OF IT  
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1st Commando Brigade had attacked a few hours before. The 119th were the furthest downstream, hugging the Lieppe Canal as they moved towards the railway junction just outside the village of Friedrichsfeld.

Despite some stubborn opposition the unit made startling progress, as the few remaining defenders in their sector had either been killed or demoralised by the artillery assault. They understandably put up little or no opposition as one soldier described the terrified survivors as “completely stunned, scared and shook up; they had never encountered anything like it”.

To the south the 117th also made a quick advance on the villages of Spellen, Löhnen and Voerde. Its key objective was to clear up any anti-aircraft forces that could potentially wreak havoc on the airborne troops expected in just a few hours.

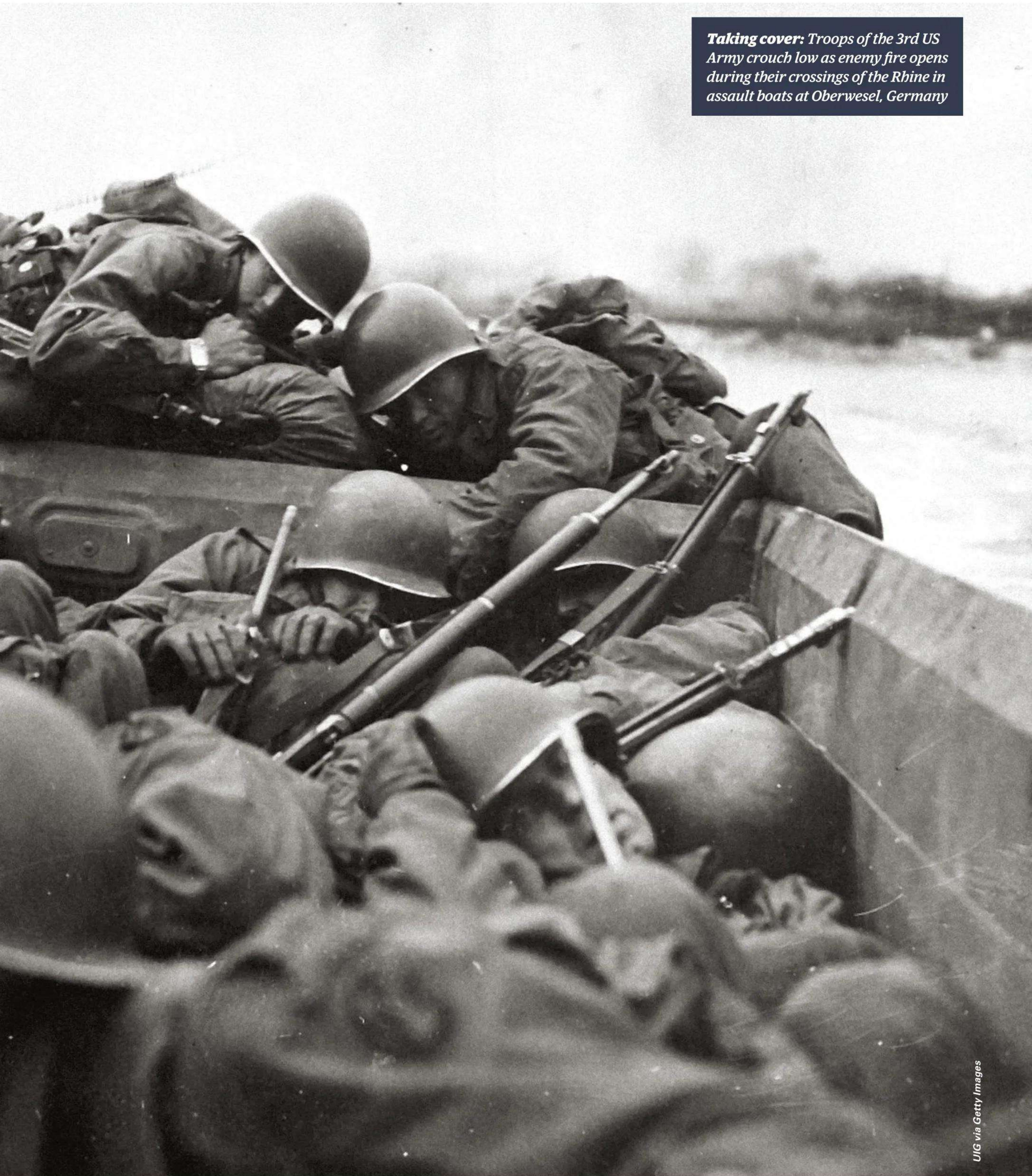
Both, however, were put to shame by its sister regiment the 120th, which followed a bend in the Rhine to seize not only Möllen but both the vital railway lines either side of it. In the end it was forced to stop 10km from the river, as the artillery on the far shore was out of range. Despite a few amphibious Sherman DD tanks that made it across with the boats, the infantry were lightly armed and reliant on the accurate firepower of artillery to eliminate heavy armour and enemy defences.

The 79th Infantry made the fifth and final crossing of the night at 3.00am to secure the southernmost flank of the front. By this point the river and battlefields were so choked with smoke that some boats of the 315th Regiment ended up getting lost on the river to the extent that when they hit the shore they discovered they were in fact back where they started, seeing their comrades setting off for the enemy shore in order to assault Dinslaken. The assault was so ►





***Taking cover:*** Troops of the 3rd US Army crouch low as enemy fire opens during their crossings of the Rhine in assault boats at Oberwesel, Germany





## RIVER ASSAULT

effective that only 40 men were killed in the night-time raid. However, this was eclipsed by the 313th 2km upstream, which made very quick progress in a two-pronged attack on Walsum and Overbruch for the loss of just one man. In XVI Corps' rear was the 35th and 75th Divisions and 8th Armoured Division, which made the crossing as soon as possible to reinforce the huge bridgehead the first troops had made south of Wesel.

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AS DAWN  
APPROACHED  
IT WAS CLEAR  
THE LANDINGS  
HAD BEEN AN  
OVERWHELMING  
SUCCESS  
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As dawn approached it was clear the landings had been an overwhelming success, capturing the crucial objectives for only a few casualties. Amphibious tanks were slowly adding weight to the established positions to help push on to expand the bridgehead and await the counterattacks intended to throw the British back into the river. These indeed came at both Wesel and most determinedly at Rees. It was initially successful, with the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division attacking the village of Speldrop to the north of Rees, forcing the 1st Black Watch to relinquish its brief hold. The first counterattack to hit Wesel was described by Lt Samain as a, "most half-hearted affair, consisting of a few waves of infantry, supported by cumbersome Mark IV tanks and self-propelled guns. The infantry were easily beaten off, and for some unknown reason the tanks didn't attempt to come too close."

As daylight made sense of the situation and the Germans recovered from the initial shock, their individual performance came to the fore, as the paratroopers stood firm against losing any more hamlets to the invaders. Until 9.30, however, they were also up against more accurate artillery fire and continued air attacks. As the guns on the western bank ceased their 15-hour bombardment, the troops now knew they had to await the airborne operation that was due any minute. ■



Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images





**Build up:** US 9th Army personnel gather near landing areas along the Rhine after being ferried across during Operation Plunder by various landing craft



## RIVER ASSAULT

**Preparing for battle:** *Combat engineers of the 30th Div, 9th US Army ferry tanks across the Rhine during the mass crossings*













***Walking to war:** American soldiers of 75th Division march along a dirt road after crossing the Rhine on a pontoon bridge during the Allied drive towards Berlin*





# OPERATION VARSITY

## ONCE THE RHINE HAD BEEN TRAVERSED, EYES TURNED TO THE SKY AS ALLIED AIRBORNE TROOPS ARRIVED

**W**hile the German defenders on the west bank of the Rhine were being shelled and seemingly attacked from all sides by American and British troops who had suddenly appeared in the darkness, an armada of planes was bringing even more troops to attack them from the rear. The British 6th Airborne and US 17th Airborne were both aiming to land north of Wesel to knock out any German artillery left and repel any counterattacks that could threaten the bridgehead established through the night.

Whereas most paratrooper deployments during the war, such as with the Blitzkrieg and Normandy landings, had consisted of surprise attacks by men jumping to hold onto positions before being relieved by stronger ground forces, Varsity would see the roles reversed: it was the soldiers crossing the river who would be relieved by the airborne troops. In order for this to be effective, the daylight landing of the largest single airborne force in the war so far was assembled. It used 1,696 C-47 Dakota and

other transports and 1,348 gliders that would carry both 21,680 men as well as jeeps, guns and small tanks into the heart of the enemy's defence.

Montgomery insisted on the drop taking place during daylight. Though the argument against this was the risk it presented to planes from anti-aircraft fire, it was outweighed by his desire to have the troops land accurately and avoid the confusion of D-Day when thousands of paratroopers were wasted finding their bearings after being dropped in the wrong place. It also avoided unnecessary risk to the paratroopers and glider infantry from the monumental artillery barrage inflicted upon the Germans during the night, while landing them close enough that they could make an immediate impact on the fighting.

### TARGET WESEL

All the landing zones were concentrated to the north of Wesel, but each of the divisions had different objectives. The key was the pivotal River Issel that ran almost parallel a few kilometres behind the Rhine. Allowing for the fact that the Germans were still using the bridges for ferrying troops over, the airborne were to seize six intact bridges to help the breakout from the bridgehead in the coming days, avoiding another risky river crossing. The British 6th took the northern sector with two parachute drops on drop zones DZ-A and DZ-B and glider landing zones LZ-O, P, R and U. They would then secure bridges, take Hamminkeln and hold the left flank after it met up with the 15th (Scottish). The Americans meanwhile would land to the south at DZ-X and DZ-W, LZ-N and LZ-S take some of the higher ground and help the 1st Commandos in their tough assault on Wesel. ►

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VARSITY WOULD  
SEE THE ROLES  
REVERSED: IT  
WAS THE SOLDIERS  
CROSSING THE RIVER  
WHO WOULD BE  
RELIEVED BY THE  
AIRBORNE TROOPS  
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**Aerial view:** The view from the cockpit of a Horsa glider during the airborne drop east of the Rhine, 25 March 1945





**Briefing:** Brigadier General JV Phelps of the 17th US Airborne Division at a briefing ahead of the mission





**Preparations:** Sir Bernard Montgomery (left) discusses plans with Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham (centre) and Lieutenant General Sir Miles Dempsey on 22 March 1945

The day before the flight, the official meteorologists confirmed that the weather would be good enough for the massive aerial assault to take place safely. It was only now that the men assembled in the airfields were briefed on the exact nature of the operation. Private Taylor of the 6th Airborne stated, "We knew that we were going into action again, but we had no idea exactly where. We were soon to find out though, because everyone was called to the briefing the day before. It was the 23 March 1945. I remember it so well because it was my birthday and I was thinking 'what a birthday present, I won't forget this.'" After the details were conveyed the unit's brigadier had a quick but effective message for his assembled troops: "I know you have a reputation for killing the enemy, so tomorrow, get stuck in and do your job."

The two divisions would take off from airfields in different countries, with the

6th leaving from south east England and the US 17th from France. At around 4.00am, while the fire fights for Wesel, Rees and Friedrichsfeld were at their most intense, the paratroopers and glider forces on both sides of the Channel were awake, eating their breakfast and strapping on their ludicrously heavy gear that included parachutes, helmets, weapons and ammunitions. On the other side of the Channel in Paris, the men of the 17th Airborne were dining out on their far superior breakfast, as was always the case with American rations during the war, which consisted of steak, eggs and apple pie, before assembling in their areas ready to depart.

While the river assault troops had learned from D-Day and mostly cut down the amount of kit they carried into battle, the airborne troops still struggled to get into their aircraft with the sheer weight of ►

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 "WE KNEW WE WERE GOING INTO ACTION AGAIN, BUT WE HAD NO IDEA WHERE... I REMEMBER IT WELL BECAUSE IT WAS MY BIRTHDAY AND I WAS THINKING 'WHAT A BIRTHDAY PRESENT'."

PRIVATE TAYLOR, 6TH AIRBORNE  
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## RIVER ASSAULT

**All aboard:** Paratroopers of the 17th US Airborne Division board a C-46 transport plane at an airfield in England





their gear. Many men waddled into their gliders and aircraft, often having to be helped in by one another and the ground crew. Pte Taylor explained the preparations that morning as they awaited to board the vehicles that would take them into battle: "We were assembled and taken to the airfield and dropped alongside our glider. In the half light of dawn we could see it and the tow rope looped in waves on the ground, and just ahead, our tug aircraft, a Stirling bomber. It was time to load up and we took our places. I was the two inch mortar man and with my no 2 we were at the back of the aircraft with platoon HQ and the platoon commander... Just before take off the tug pilot poked his head in the door and wished us good luck, cheerfully adding that he was glad that he was not landing with us." However, not everyone got on board successfully. Though most of the troops had experience of combat before, the nerves got the better of some: two men were invalided out with self-inflicted wounds; one unsuccessfully attempted to fake a case of VD; and several were simply overcome by nerves, with one man of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshires causing a scene and refusing to set foot in his glider. Another in the 6th Airborne broke down and said he couldn't go on, but was reassured by his Lieutenant Downward that the odds were on his side, and that he had to think of his family's feelings if he was court marshalled for cowardice. The boy eventually joined his brothers in arms and survived the fighting.

## TAKING OFF

In England the 381 Horsa gliders carrying troops and larger 48 Hamilcar gliders with bulldozers, jeeps and tanks, took off at 7.10am and met up with the C-47 Dakotas that carried the 6th Airborne's paratroopers, including the 1st Canadian Parachute Brigade. As well as flying their own men from

France, many of the transport pilots that carried the British troops into battle were Americans, who helped ease the nerves of some of their passengers before they gave them the red and green lights that signalled four minutes to the jump and the jump itself. One commander commented that, "The Yanks radiated a matter of fact confidence, well suited to the fleeting but vital relationship between parachutist and air crews." For the next three hours troops sat largely in silence as they awaited the jump into a battle zone. Private Taylor explained the atmosphere in his glider as men tried to comprehend the job ahead: "I think most of us were a little apprehensive, I always was before going into action, but I had learned that as soon as we had actually started to move, all fear and dismal thoughts of getting wounded or killed disappeared as we threw ourselves into the job. It is the waiting that is hard."

Just to illustrate the fact that the Germans weren't beaten yet, a V-1 flying bomb, launched from bases still active in northern Europe, flew past the aircraft on its way to London. These weapons, along with the V-2 rocket and other super weapons concocted by Hitler's scientists were a warning to how the Germans could have won the war by now had they such weapons in abundance earlier in the conflict. They made the paper-thin gliders being towed along the British sky look almost medieval by comparison. This was made more apparent as the craft hit pockets of air turbulence causing them to "drop 20 feet or more without warning, and one's stomach would be left up in the air somewhat like a roller coaster at the fairground. Of course we did get used to it but the issued vomit bags were in frequent use", according to Private Taylor. This was hardly ideal preparation for men about to be involved in a fight with some of the finest soldiers in the entirety of WWII.

Over Brussels the British met up with the transports and gliders carrying the 17th Airborne, which had taken off from Paris around the same time. For many it was to be their first jump, but although nervous, they were backed up by the exemplary example shown by the US airborne divisions in the European theatre so far. During the run in the RAF fighter squadrons from England and US Ninth Air Force from France turned back, as the RAF Second Tactical Air Force came into view. These 1,227 Thunderbolt and Mustang fighters would now be responsible

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GLIDERS LOOK  
ALMOST MEDIEVAL

for helping the transports and gliders reach their final destination. Above all they were needed to try to take on the dreaded Messerschmitt Me 262. Known as the Swallow among the Allied aircrews, this was the world's first jet-powered fighter, and though low in numbers on the Western Front, it was a typical piece of terrifying German engineering, eclipsing all that the RAF and USAF had to offer. With its lightning speed just one could cause carnage among the vast armada descending onto the Rhine battlefield. Attacks on airfields from where these formidable jets were known to operate were stepped up in the hours leading up to Varsity.

## CHURCHILL ARRIVES

Just before 10.00am on 24 March, 12 hours since the first boats had crossed the Rhine, the battle was going so well for the Allies. It looked like it was reaching the final decisive play as the artillery on the west bank stopped and the sky became full of aircraft bringing in the airborne troops. The man looking on with the greatest pride was Montgomery. After the unfortunate disaster that befell his master plan at Arnhem, and the taunts of his fellow commanders, this massive aerial army looked set to deliver him an almost perfect victory. His company couldn't have been more esteemed, as it included both Supreme Commander General Eisenhower and none other than British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Despite the danger of shells and mortars landing not far away, the iconic leader was adamant that he had to witness the success of the biggest single airborne operation of the war. However, as the aircraft passed overhead, things

*Continued on page 70 ►*

"ONE'S STOMACH  
WOULD BE LEFT  
UP IN THE AIR  
SOMEWHAT LIKE A  
ROLLER COASTER."

PRIVATE TAYLOR



## RIVER ASSAULT





# HELL FROM ON HIGH

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SO CLOSE THEY CAN ALMOST TOUCH WINGS, A FLEET OF AMERICAN C-47S, ATTACHED TO GLIDERS VIA CABLES, AWAIT TAKE-OFF. ONBOARD ARE TROOPS FROM THE 1ST ALLIED AIRBORNE ARMY, BRITISH, CANADIAN AND AMERICAN SOLDIERS WHO WILL SOON BE LEAPING OUT INTO THE SKIES OVER GERMANY WITH THE TASK OF LANDING IN ENEMY TERRITORY AND SEIZING STRATEGICALLY VITAL VILLAGES. ■

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## RIVER ASSAULT

*Continued from page 67*

started to go wrong. After a handful of pathfinders jumped to mark the landing zones, the first in were the British and American paratroopers, some of whom landed nine and ten minutes earlier than their 10.00am tryst, and descended under light anti-aircraft fire. Each brigade designated for DZ-A landed on target and quickly went about securing the landing areas ready for the next waves and cumbersome gliders. However, it was a different story for DZ-B, which came in under a barrage of flak and small arms fire that few expected to have survived the earlier shelling and bombing raids. Despite the artillery on the west bank knowing exactly where the German anti-aircraft batteries were located thanks to a flak map captured during the assault on Wesel overnight and ongoing attacks from RAF Typhoons, the cacophony of exploding shells that was sent up into the sky from 357 flak positions was ominous for the approaching pilots and onlookers. Right away two C-47s were shot down, while another 10 were taken out, luckily after they had dropped their troops. Seven more were so badly damaged that they eventually went down in the Channel on their return home.

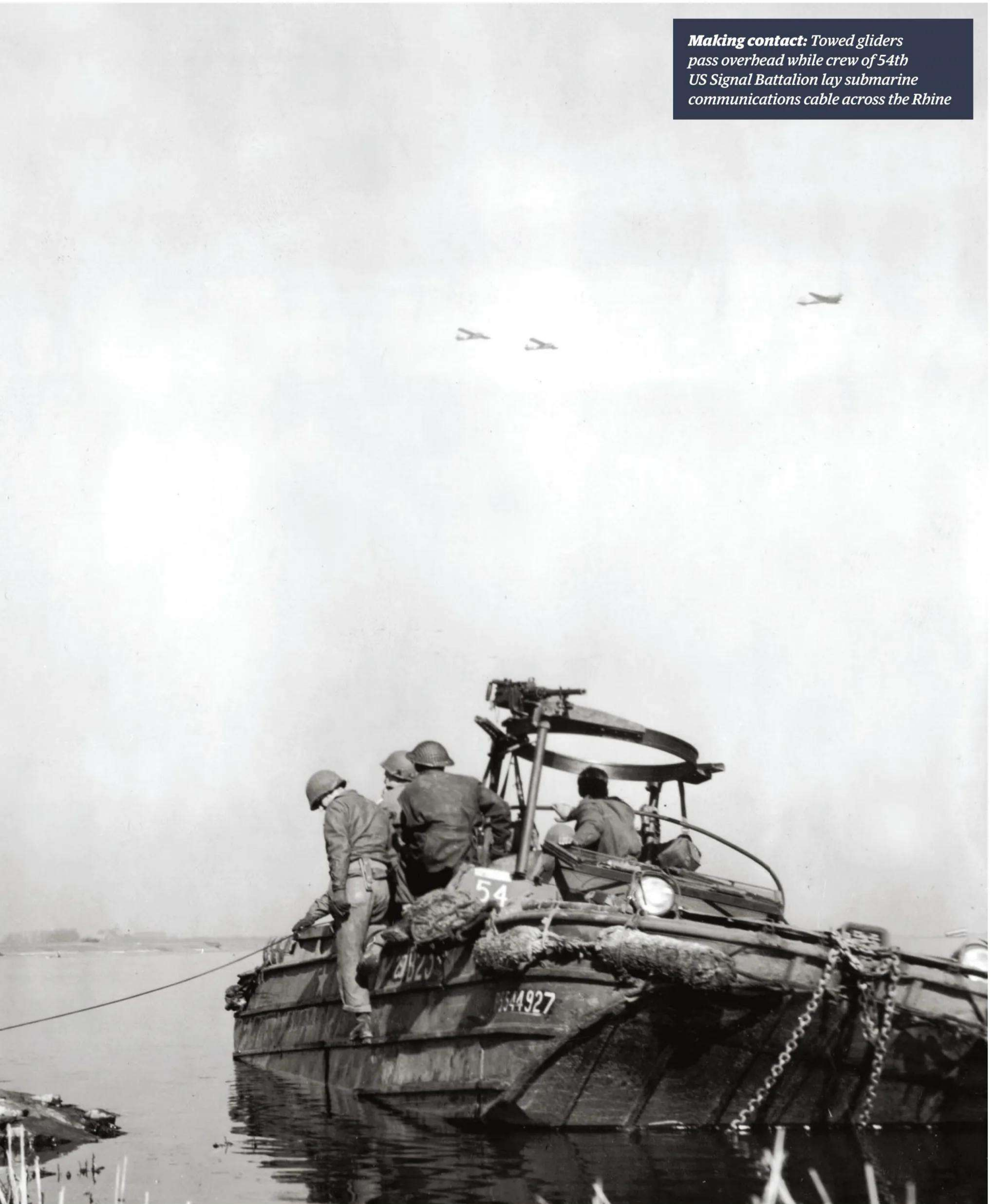
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The C-47s carrying the Americans suffered far worse. They had been ordered to fly in extremely tight formations just 200 metres above the ground when they released their sticks of men. Though this prevented the troopers having a long, exposed descent, it provided the German anti-aircraft batteries with easy targets, with the sky soon full of burning and exploding aircraft, some with men still inside. Some of the greatest losses came among the brand-new C-46 Commando ►





***Making contact:*** Towed gliders pass overhead while crew of 54th US Signal Battalion lay submarine communications cable across the Rhine





## RIVER ASSAULT

**Final checks:** US 17th  
Airborne Division  
paratroopers help each other  
ahead of the aerial invasion





aircraft used by the 17th Airborne for the first time. All seemed to be going well as the fast carriers came into the battlefield, making it harder for the now overwhelmed German gunners to pick them off among the array of targets now filling up the sky. However, many of the pilots were confused by the smoke below them and chaotic scenes in the air ahead that were now filled with parachutes, aircraft and explosions. After missing their landing zones, some of the C-46s strayed into the fiercest anti-aircraft fire, setting their troops down in the wrong place or being blown to smithereens. The problem was an unbeknown faulty fuel tank in the wings that was easily set alight once punctured by shrapnel, resulting in the skies being lit up by 22 exploding C-46s out of just 72. Lt Gen Ridgeway made a note that the death traps were to never be used again in combat. Private Robby Robson was one of those who was lucky enough to bail out just in time: "My plane The Red Dog was hit on the port side causing the engine to burst into flame and making it quite iffy as we had to jump through the flames of a plane out of control. As I was second to last in the stick, I became quite anxious about getting out in time. Sadly The Red Dog crashed with its valiant crew."

### A HELLISH DROP

Though the troops managed to escape the aircraft unscathed, their ordeal was only just beginning. As their white parachutes unfolded against the mid-morning sky they instantly became sitting ducks for the defenders on the ground, who strafed wave after wave of helpless paratroopers on their way down to earth. As each man's weapon was tucked away for the jump,

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the troops couldn't even respond with their own fire as the Germans picked off individuals helplessly descending to earth. Even terra firma gave them no refuge, as the paratroopers were shot at while trying to untangle themselves from their chutes and gather their weapons. Worse befell the many who landed and became stuck in trees. Though some could untangle themselves, the battlefield became a morose scene as the bodies of paratroopers hung limply from branches.

**ABOVE** *Down to earth:*  
Paratroopers of the 17th US Airborne  
Division descending towards the  
ground near Wesel

The commanding officer of the Canadians was just one of several paratroopers who was caught in trees and shot by Germans as he struggled, which led to his men giving little mercy to any enemy they encountered throughout the day. ►



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 "AT THIS STAGE  
 TO HAVE LANDED  
 SAFELY WAS TO BE  
 INOCULATED WITH  
 100% MORALE."  
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COLONEL HEWSON

Brigadier Poett of 5th Para Brigade underlined the vulnerability of the paratroopers in the first minutes of the landing: "Although all three battalions had been dropped accurately, individual officers and men experienced considerable trouble in working out their exact positions. This period on the DZ was where most of our casualties occurred." However, the landing also brought elation from troops as it meant they could now take the fight to the enemy. The rigorous training that had been drilled into the paratroopers prepared them for the situation, meaning as soon as they hit the ground they got themselves ready, found their bearings and engaged the enemy closest to them. Colonel Hewson remarked, "Men were getting out of their harnesses and opening kit bags with feverish haste, talking to anyone within call about the jump, for at this stage of the operation to have landed safely is to be inoculated with 100% morale." Another officer in 13 Para reported how overwhelmed the enemy were as soon as his men elatedly took the fight to them in the grip of bloodlust. "Once we were on the ground we were immediately faced with the enemy. One of my platoons captured a machine gun position and we started taking prisoners... There was an objective and that is what we went for – wearing our red berets and shouting our heads off!" Many paratroopers were lucky to land on deserted fields that had been occupied several hours earlier. However, due to the unorthodox surprise of parachutes following the main assault, the Germans had simply abandoned these positions thinking no paratroopers were coming. Hewson again exclaimed, "When no paratroopers appeared, at 9.00am hours most of [the Germans] had been sent forward to counterattack the troops crossing the Rhine. I was very glad to hear it!"

## GIVING UP THE FIGHT

Despite the ferocious fire that came up from the various flak positions and pockets

of defenders, once they landed, many of the paratroops discovered there was in fact little fight left in their opponents, who after shooting at the aircraft and men on their descent often readily surrendered in droves. One case in particular among 7 Para Regiment, reflected how some of the Germans were looking for the quickest and safest way to give up. When one NCO was dropped out of range of the DZ his officer observed, "as this man was coming down he could see someone on the ground just about where he expected to land. As he got lower, he could see that it was a German parachutist and that he had a Schmeisser [sub machine gun] in his hands. There was really nothing he could do about it and so he just cursed his luck and landed in a heap at the German's feet. He told me afterwards that he shut his eyes and waited for the burst from the Schmeisser but it was so long in coming that he opened them again to see what the hitch was. He found that the German was collapsing his chute for him and when he had done this he helped him out of his harness and unpacked his Bren gun from the kit bag – he then surrendered to him. When he had got over the shock of this, the NCO noticed that about 20 more Germans had arrived and they all surrendered to him too."

## DIFFICULT LANDINGS

Despite the fact the daylight landing zone was easy to spot from the air, the haze of fog and smoke made it tricky to pinpoint the locations. Some pilots inevitably dropped their troops too early or late, with one of the worst cases being some of the 507th Regimental Combat Team of the 17th, who were inexplicably dropped 2km from their DZ-W destination. Though this sometimes meant coming down in a lightly-defended sector, the 507th found themselves right in the middle of a firefight.

The experience of landing amidst such violent scenes was far more terrifying and hazardous for the men in the gliders that were due in next. The fragile craft were hammered by machine gun and flak fire as they came over the Rhine to their landing zones, and offered little protection to the men sheltering in the belly of the craft. To make matters worse, the glider pilots, for whom a clear landing area was essential, made several trips over the same area while being raked by fire to make sure they had the best chance of landing safely. Even then, many of the inexperienced pilots brought the craft crashing down into trees of enemy positions, where they were

mercilessly ripped apart, with pilots and men killed and vital equipment damaged. The losses were higher among American WACO gliders, which were being towed two-at-a-time by C-47s, which meant that if a transport was hit then its two gliders went down as well.

For all intents and purposes, the eventual result for a successful glider landing was that it came to a halt on a landing zone by crashing. The losses to pilots in the night-time landings on D-Day had been tremendous, but even now in daylight it was to prove a rare occurrence for a glider to come down without damage. One account from Harry Clarke describes the horror of even a routine landing: "The Horsa cast off from its tug aircraft about two miles over the enemy side of the river... Anti-aircraft fire began to intensify as we rapidly lost altitude. We plunged into the smoke. Most of the men in the Horsa sat silently in their seats, waiting for the certain impact of the crash landing that would shortly occur. Our glider hit the ground at approximately 90mph, losing the wheels on impact. Pieces of wings were torn off as we went through a series of ditches and hedges. We came to a halt and swiftly removed ourselves from the battered wreckage." Lt Jack Curtis Goldman of the 17th successfully landed amongst heavy fire that he described as "if a giant popcorn machine had exploded in the back of the glider". Sickeningly he brought the glider down over the bodies of dead paratroopers, and lost several of his friends to the fire that had raked the back of the craft. In another glider medics reported that they found 16 unattached legs. All around there was carnage.

*Continued on page 78 ►*

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**Injured:** A medical orderly attends to an injured GI in Germany near the Dutch border during the assault across the Rhine









# A BREATH FROM BATTLE

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MEN OF THE 17TH US AIRBORNE DIVISION TAKE A WELL-EARNED BREAK BESIDE A ROAD AS THEY AWAIT THE ORDER TO PRESS ON TOWARDS THE CITY OF MUNSTER, SITUATED 50 MILES NORTHEAST OF THE RHINE. TANKS OF THE BRITISH COLDSTREAM GUARDS CAN BE SEEN HEADING DOWN THE ROAD BEHIND THE CROUCHED TROOPS. OVER 60 PER CENT OF THE CITY WOULD BE OBLITERATED BY ALLIED BOMBING. ■

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*Continued from page 74*

### TERRIBLE LOSSES

The main losses occurred on LZ-P, where gliders carrying small howitzers and the nippy Locust light tanks crashed with alarming regularity, meaning few of these vital weapons could be used in the fight. As Hewson remembered: "The gliders began to arrive at 11.00am. One of the first down overshot the LZ but although it was badly damaged there were no casualties... Suddenly with a terrific crash another glider came through the trees and I found myself under the wheel of a jeep. I managed to crawl out from the wreckage to find the glider completely written off. The crew had been killed and my intelligence officer and two sergeants were also dead." Another parachute officer observed "the saddest thing I saw was when we were moving towards our battalion objective. There were glider pilots still sitting in their cockpits, having been roasted alive after their gliders had caught fire. One pilot and co-pilot were still sitting there with their hands on the control columns. A lot of people were lost like that. Although we lost quite a lot of casualties in the air, it was nowhere near those of the glider borne troops." Despite their losses the British glider troops quickly set about seizing bridges and railway crossings and surrounding Hamminkeln, ready for the 12th Devonshire Regiment from LZ-R to overrun the town. Even though the planners had planned 500 men to take on the town, the dispersed troops successfully assaulted the town with just the 50 that they could muster from the wrecked gliders.

Once the difficulty of landing had been traversed, the job of eliminating opposition and gaining the all-important objectives began. The stranded First 507th had perhaps the toughest circumstances of the day. Not only did they have ►

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"OUR GLIDER  
HIT THE GROUND  
AT 90MPH. WE  
SWIFTLY REMOVED  
OURSELVES FROM  
THE WRECKAGE."

LT JACK CURTIS GOLDMAN  
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**Landed:** *Glider troops of the 17th US Airborne Division leave their gliders and prepare for enemy resistance, 24 March 1945*





## RIVER ASSAULT

their objectives of taking Diersfordter to complete alongside their sister battalions, but before this they had to fight their way through heavy small arms and artillery fire where they had been unceremoniously dumped outside the forest by Diersfordter itself. One stroke of luck for the 507th assaulting the town was that they were equipped with 57mm anti-tank guns, similar to the German Panzerfaust. When two German Panzers approached the RCT who had no armour of their own, the new guns quickly took one out and forced the other to surrender. The 507th then moved onto the most heavily-defended part of the Diersfordter, its castle. In scenes more suited to a medieval siege, the 3rd

Battalion under Lt Col Smith bombarded the battlements and turrets before storming the front door and clearing the spiral staircases and rooms, often doing so through hand-to-hand fighting. Eventually guns of the 404th Parachute Field Artillery from DZ-W, which had been assembled under heavy fire, were used to blast away the final turret where the besieged Germans were making a last stand. With the castle taken, the 507th moved into support the Commandos still clearing away pockets of resistance in Wesel.

To their north were 513th Regiment, which had been in the unfortunate C-46s. Most of them were set down in the British sector, some 3,000 metres

from DZ-X, while others were scattered elsewhere. The 513th's commander Colonel Coutts only twigged that something had gone drastically wrong when he saw the unmistakable red berets of the British 6th Airborne all around him. Communications between the 6th and 17th were badly affected during the day, given that so many radio operators had died in the landing, however, in this instance Coutts was able to find his British peers and work out his coordinates, soon realising that it was his team, not the British, that were in the wrong place.

When he eventually reached DZ-X some hours later he was amazed to find it deserted, and even more galling was



**Ready for action:** Men of the 17th US Airborne Division prepare to jump at Wesel on the Dutch border during the operation to secure the Rhine crossing

Getty Images, Robert Capa/Getty Images



at 15.30 when he discovered his RCT's objectives had already been secured by others.

Those glidermen of the 194th Glider Infantry Regiment who made it to the landing zones also had a hard day's fighting ahead of them. They were the furthest troops dropped, and were responsible for repelling several counterattacks directly east of Wesel. However, the enormous success of accurate glider landings in LZ-S and LZ-N meant the last vital bridges over the Issel were seized, and eventually the fresh troops relieved the exhausted British Commandos by taking over the northern side of Wesel.

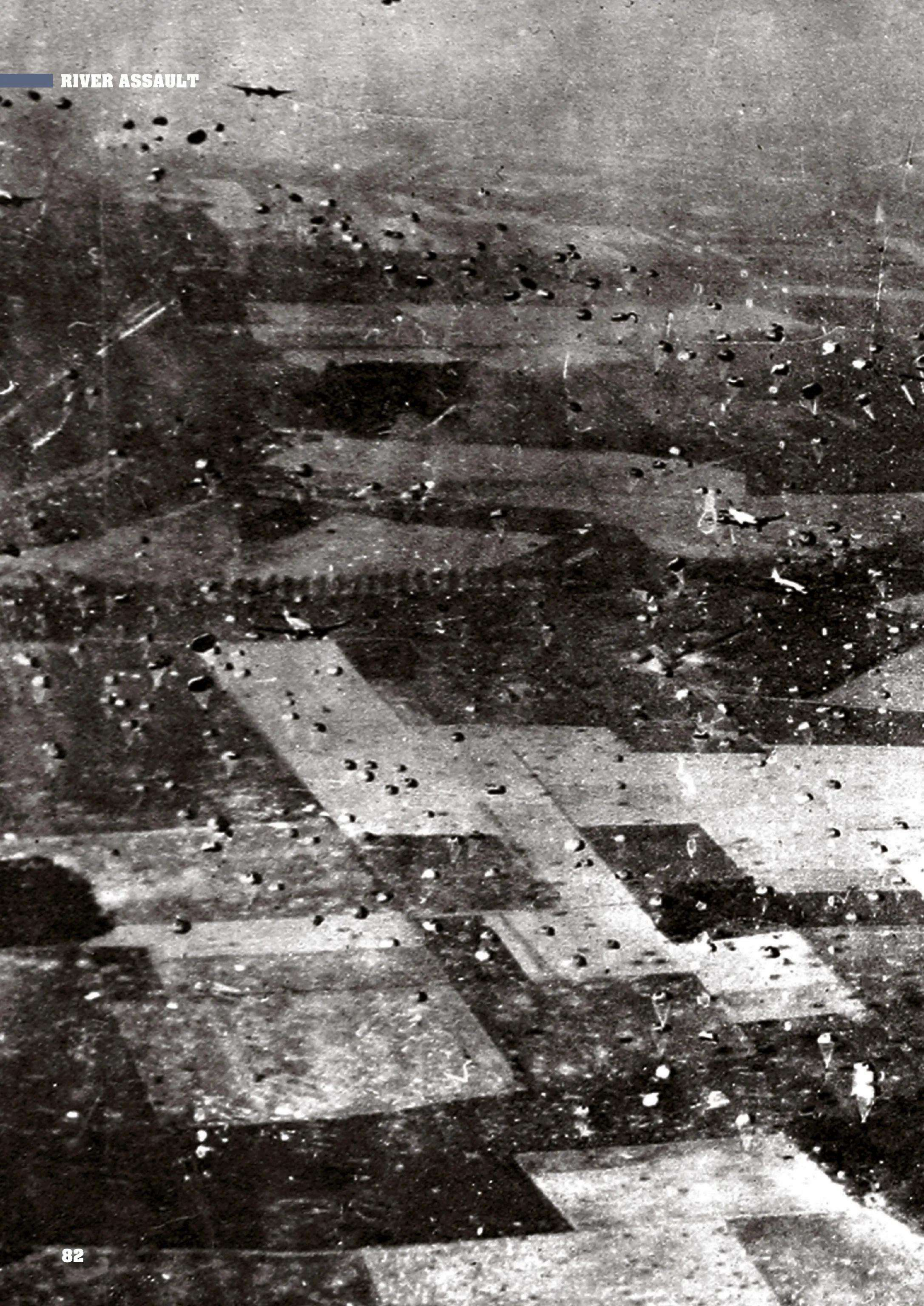
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 BEFORE STORMING  
 THE FRONT DOOR  
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Two of the most extraordinary acts of bravery seen in the bridgehead earned Canadian Cpl Topham, a Victoria Cross, the highest British and Commonwealth decoration for gallantry. Not long after landing his unit ran into a hail of machine gun fire, and Topham immediately set out to rescue a wounded comrade amongst the dead while injured himself. His official citation described his actions in detail: "He ran past the mortally wounded medical orderlies to the man still lying in the exposed area. Shots rained about him as he tended the wounded soldier; one bullet ripped across his cheek and another through his nose. Toppy refused to be evacuated. He went back out there again and again and continued evacuating the drop zone until he had cleared it. It wasn't until then that he finally agreed to sit down and listen to reason and let the doctor work on him". This was only half of Topham's extraordinary heroics that day, as he came across a Bren-gun carrier that was on fire after being hit by a shell. Cpl Einarson of the Machine Gun Platoon saw Topham "jump on top of the carrier and  
*Continued on page 86 ►*



**Helping hand:** A paratrooper of the 17th US Airborne Division carries an injured soldier to a first aid station. A parachute hangs from a telegraph wire overhead







# JUMP FOR VICTORY

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COUNTLESS PARACHUTES BILLOW OPEN ABOVE THE CHEQUERED FIELDS OUTSIDE THE CITY OF WESEL IN NORTH RHINE-WESTPHALIA AS ALLIED PARATROOPERS BARREL OUT OF PLANES IN THEIR THOUSANDS. THE LARGEST AIRBORNE ASSAULT EVER COMPLETED ON A SINGLE DAY, OPERATION VARSITY SAW OVER 16,000 SOLDIERS DESCENDING ON THE AREA. THEY WOULD SUFFER 2,000 CASUALTIES BUT CAPTURED NUMEROUS CRITICAL POSITIONS. ■

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# HORSA OVERHEAD

ALLIED TROOPS LOOK ON AS A BRITISH AIRSPEED HORSA GLIDER COMES IN TO LAND BEARING MORE REINFORCEMENTS. FAIRLY CHEAP TO BUILD, QUIET AND CAPABLE OF DROPPING A LARGE AMOUNT OF MEN IN A CONCENTRATED AREA, GLIDERS WERE AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE ALLIED WAR EFFORT, ALTHOUGH THE WEHRMACHT WERE THE FIRST TO DEPLOY THEM, IN MAY 1940, WHEN CAPTURING THE BELGIAN FORT OF EBEN-EMAEL. ■





## RIVER ASSAULT

*Continued from page 81*

literally lift the occupants out. I thought the person was absolutely out of his mind, being up on top of the thing was literally exploding and burning and popping underneath him. I looked back and saw him jump off, then the carrier exploded.”

Throughout the scenes of dead bodies hanging from trees, broken gliders and vehicles on fire, there were also cases of compassion, especially from medics on both sides who treated casualties wherever they found them, regardless of which side they were on.

### SECURING THE SHORE

As the day progressed, the small pockets of German resistance were mopped up by both the troops that had crossed the Rhine and those who had been brought by air. Scores of prisoners had been rounded up and were now under guard of the men who were awaiting a major German counterattack against the still vulnerable bridgehead. The major strikes fell at Rees, where the 51st Division was able to repel it and the bridges over the Issel taken by the airborne troops. Though the ground shook as the massive German Panthers and Tigers rolled into view, the airborne troops had had time to set up anti-tank defences, and with the help of extremely effective handheld anti-tank weapons and repeated attacks from aircraft and artillery across the Rhine, they were quickly snuffed out. The only occasion that the Germans looked like breaking through east of Hamminkeln led the local British commander to blow the bridge and deny it to the Germans. Despite this, the Allies still had five intact bridges over the Issel from which to continue the assault.

More troops were being ferried over in boats, so it was crucial that the 37,000 British and 22,000 American engineers set about making the bridges to get as much armour over the Rhine as soon as possible in order to expedite the breakout into the Ruhr valley. As soon as the eastern shore had been secured in the early hours of 24 March the engineers started to construct the bridges, still shrouded in smoke from the assaults and without the unwanted attention of German guns which were now occupied repelling the troops. In all, three bridges were constructed, with the first 350m long pontoon bridge in the 30th Division's sector sending over the first tanks and men by 1am on 25 March. The other two bridges were delayed by fire

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“I THOUGHT HE  
WAS OUT OF HIS  
MIND... THE THING  
WAS EXPLODING  
UNDERNEATH HIM.”

CPL EINARSON ON CPL TOPHAM  
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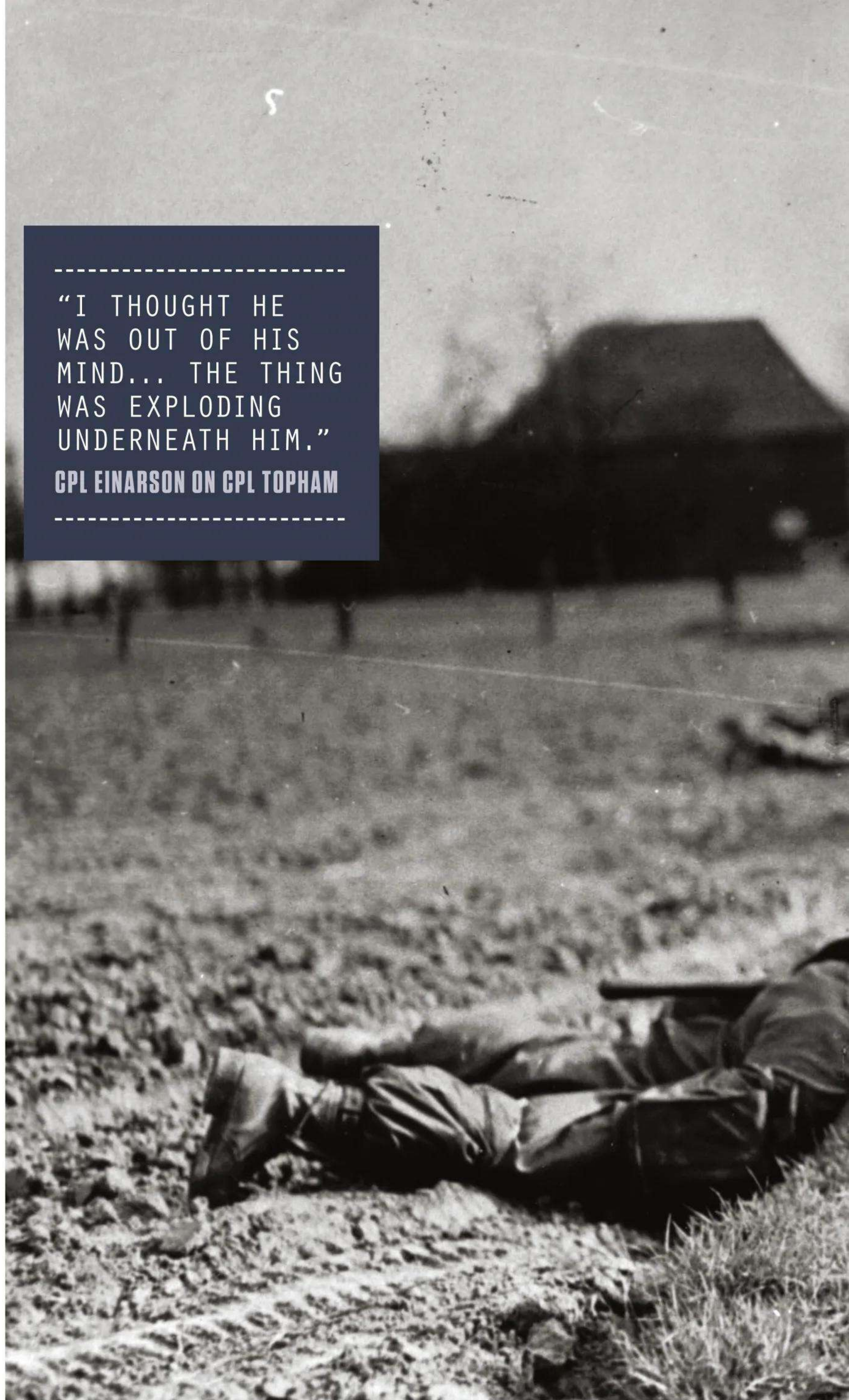
and strong currents taking parts of the bridge downstream, but in an impressive feat of battlefield engineering, all three were up and running by 26 March.

### THE GUNS FALL SILENT

At the end of the day, British Colonel Darling was able to survey the battlefield and make sense out of the chaotic scenes that had raged around him just a few hours before. “Towards the evening, an eerie silence fell over the DZ, which had been such a noisy battleground. Enemy

resistance had been completely flattened and thus I was able to ride a horse, found on one of the farms nearby, around the battalion area.” Less than a day after the first shells had been fired across the Rhine, the American, British and Canadian units were now firmly established on the eastern shore. As the dust settled on the battlefield it was obvious that the Allies had won a significant victory. However, the victory had not come without loss.

Amazingly, the actual assault of the Rhine had been achieved with only







***Taking cover:*** US troops of the 1st Allied Airborne Army take cover from enemy fire, shortly after landing on the east bank of the Rhine near Wesel, 24 March 1945

limited casualties, with even the pivotal centres of Rees and Wesel taken fairly lightly. The cost came from the airborne landings, with the numbers of planes shot down, paratroopers gunned down in the early stages and men killed as their gliders crashed contributing most to the final butcher's bill. The American 17th Airborne endured 1,500 casualties, of which 159 were killed. The British had 1,400 casualties, which included a staggering quarter of the brave glider pilots. The tragedy was that as men had

been volunteered to train and deliver the gliders into battle, despite limited training, because there was no other aircraft available to fly at this stage in the war. While, in the grand scale of the war, these losses were light, many believed that with the objectives seemingly already taken at such a low cost during the night, there was no need for the risky business of an aerial attack. It would be the last time the Allies used airborne troops in their specialist role, and adopted the German approach of using these elite units as

infantry. The German force similarly lost most of its 8,000 men holding the area with over 3,500 taken prisoner. That so few could cause such trouble for Montgomery proved beyond doubt that the many Wehrmacht units wasted on the wrong side of the Rhine would have been much better utilised defending the eastern shore.

It wasn't until the 25 March that Wesel was finally cleared of its last stubborn defender. Despite the ferocious urban fighting, the valiant 1st Commandos had remarkably only suffered ten men killed. ►







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 PLUNDER AND  
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### BREAKOUT

Once the Allied bridgehead was strengthened the breakout began in earnest. Though a Panzer division initially halted a breakout on the 26 March, by 27 the next day there were four Allied corps on the eastern bank, putting ever greater pressure on what few defenders remained in the area or who had been rushed there from various positions on the front.

In the north, the First Canadian Army drove towards Arnhem to finally capture it after it had failed to be taken the previous September, while the British Second Army and US First Army would go after the main prize of the operation and clear the Ruhr.

After this the broad front strategy was reemployed (led in the centre by Omar Bradley's 12th Army Group) to minimise the risk until the German surrender that all knew had to come eventually. Whenever enemy resistance was encountered the advance was halted, and the superior firepower the Allies enjoyed was brought to full-force on these fanatical German personnel who refused to surrender.

While the remaining few Tigers and Panthers continued to wreak havoc on armoured formations, it was all too little too late, as vast numbers of Germans began to surrender to the Allies or give up and go home. Even the military police failed to stem the tide, realising themselves the fight was now, to all intents and purposes, over.

The one major result to come from Operations Plunder and Varsity was the effect it had on the Eastern Front. Though the Red Army was odds on to reach Berlin before the Americans and British, when news of the Rhine crossings reached Stalin he ordered a meeting with his Generals Zhukov and Antonov to discuss the impending drive towards the German capital. He was absolutely adamant that it would be the Soviets that would reach the Nazi lair first. ■

Alamy

**Heading east:** Paratroopers of the 17th US Airborne Division hitch a ride on Churchill tanks of the 6th Guards Tank Brigade on 29 March 1945







# THE GOLDEN TALONS

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FORMED IN APRIL 1943, THE 17TH US AIRBORNE DIVISION RECEIVED A BAPTISM OF FIRE WHEN IT WAS COMMITTED TO HELPING STEM THE GERMAN ADVANCE AT THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE IN DECEMBER 1944. THE DIVISION WOULD GO ON TO PLAY A KEY PART IN BOTH OPERATION VARSITY AND THEN THE WIDER CAMPAIGN TO DEFEAT NAZI GERMANY AND END WWII. ■

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# FIRE IN THE FATHERLAND

A THICK PALL OF SMOKE ASCENDS INTO THE SKY AS A BRITISH TANK EQUIPPED WITH A FLAMETHROWER ROLLS THROUGH THE TOWN OF STERKRADE IN NORTHWEST GERMANY. DESPITE ITS FIRE-BREATHING CAPACITY, THIS TANK WASN'T RESPONSIBLE FOR THE INFERNO. THE BLACK FOG SWIRLING AROUND THE CHURCH STEEPLE IS COMING FROM A BLAZING OIL REFINERY ATTACKED BY US TROOPS. ■





# THE EASTERN FRONT

**W**hile the Allies were pushing through Germany towards Berlin's western gates, Stalin's Red Army were readying an attack from the east.

The story of how Russia turned the tide finds its roots in 1941, when Hitler launched an assault across the Russian border.



**German offensive:** German tanks and infantry attack Soviet positions on the Eastern Front, circa 1941



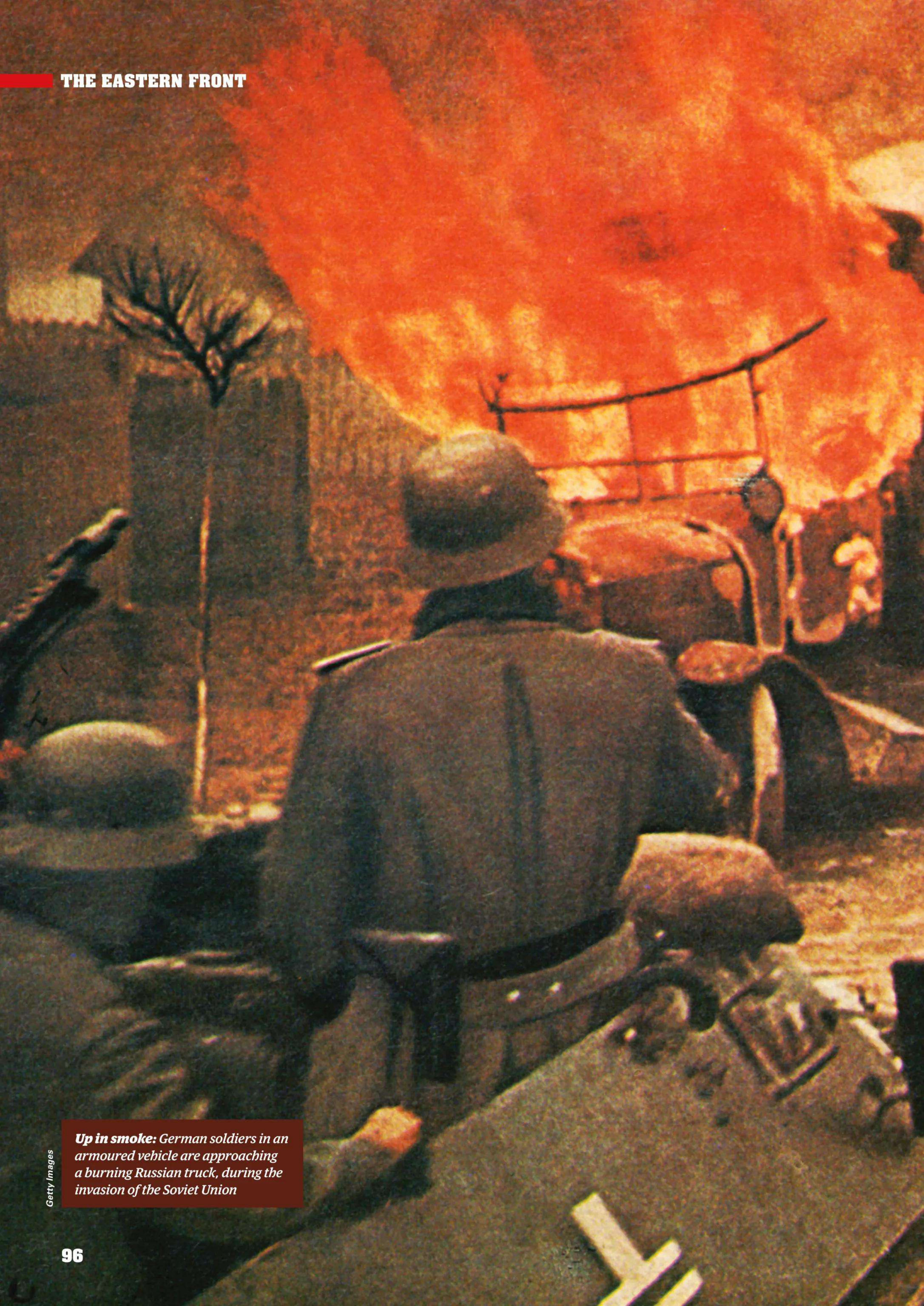
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**Up in smoke:** German soldiers in an armoured vehicle are approaching a burning Russian truck, during the invasion of the Soviet Union





# OPERATION BARBAROSSA

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**THE LARGEST INVASION OF ALL TIME SET THE SCENE FOR  
THE MOST BRUTAL FOUR YEARS IN MANKIND'S HISTORY**  
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**B**y June 1941, Adolf Hitler had total control of mainland Europe. From the Pyrenees Mountains between Spain and France in the west, up to Norway and Finland in the north, and Greece and the Balkans in the south east; every country had either allied themselves to Germany or had been swiftly conquered.

Only the neutral Spain, Switzerland, Portugal and Sweden remained untouched, while across the English Channel, Great Britain stood alone, repelling a potential invasion after the Battle of Britain, but being pushed back elsewhere in Greece and North Africa. Despite this overwhelming success it wasn't enough for Hitler, who had always talked of Lebensraum, or creating 'living space' for the German people, with eyes to the east where the enormous USSR lay, with its vast reserves of land, resources and potential slave labour of the Slavic people, who were deemed inferior under Nazi doctrine. The USSR was also the home of Joseph Stalin's brutal form of communism. Although this shared the same oppressive single-party autocracy, it was the ideological enemy of Nazism, referred to by Hitler as 'Jewish Bolshevism' that he also wanted to see wiped off the face of the Earth. Even though the pair had ruthlessly carved up Poland as war broke out in 1939, this would not deter Hitler from his ultimate goal that drove him to power in 1933: he would invade and defeat Russia.

Throughout 1941 the German build-up of formations along the newly established Russian border was conspicuous. It was obvious what was coming to all except Stalin. Despite saying to cadets just weeks before his country was invaded that war with Germany was inevitable, he refused to believe the reports that his western frontier was going to be attacked at any time. Few of the units holding the border were given orders to prepare, and as such, on 22 June 1941 when the first German units crossed the border, they made rapid gains against the unsuspecting defenders.

For the first few days of the invasion, known as Operation Barbarossa, the Wehrmacht, supported by the heavy bombers and fighters of the Luftwaffe that obliterated forward positions and wiped out Soviet planes, stormed through eastern Poland and the Balkans. The three Army Groups of North, Centre and South headed for Leningrad, Smolensk, the capital Moscow and the Ukraine. All the while Stalin sat paralysed in shock, failing to give orders, not believing that such an attack was sanctioned by the Nazi High Command. Some reports even suggested that he retreated to his home for a week while the Wehrmacht stormed his homeland. As well as blunting his forces by failing to warn them, Stalin had broken the back of the Red Army. At the height of his terrifying purges on the country, up to 30,000 Red Army officers and men were murdered or imprisoned ►



## THE EASTERN FRONT

for opposition to Stalin, real or imagined, and were replaced by men with little or no experience. Coupled with their inferior tanks, aircraft and supporting vehicles, the Soviets were no match for the Blitzkrieg attacks from the superior German forces.

In the first day alone, tanks of Army Group North advanced 50 miles towards Leningrad, and by 27 June, Army Group Centre had reached Minsk, 200 miles from their starting point. Though parts of the Soviet forces managed to inflict major losses on some of the German units, Barbarossa was typified by the Red Army being completely overwhelmed. Early counterattacks were misjudged by commanders and quickly crushed, while Stalin's policy of not taking one step back instead of making tactical retreats resulted in entire armies being quickly surrounded and destroyed. The most damaging of these was the Battle of Kiev in August and September when five Soviet armies were surrounded, resulting in an astonishing 700,000 casualties for the defenders, many of whom were taken prisoner.

### DEFENDING THE CAPITAL

With Kiev taken, the two remaining goals for Barbarossa were Leningrad, the former capital previously known as St Petersburg, and Stalin's seat of power, Moscow. With Red Army forces being obliterated all over the front, Hitler made Leningrad the priority, ordering that it be razed to the ground. Joining with Finnish forces working their way towards the city from the north, tanks from Army Group North cut off the last roads to the city, but then made a slow, bloody march towards the centre. Frustrated by the belligerent defence, Hitler ordered instead that Leningrad should be starved. Tanks of the 3rd and 4th Panzers were turned south to support Operation Typhoon, which sought to finish off Russian resistance by taking Moscow.

With so many soldiers lost, the citizens of Moscow themselves were called upon to dig anti-tank ditches and help with the defence of the capital when Operation Typhoon began on 2 October. The first lines were overwhelmed as Panzer armies attacked on three fronts, and again hundreds of thousands of Red Army troops were captured, leaving just 90,000 men to defend Moscow. By 13 October the Germans were just 90 miles from the centre, with Hitler's government proudly announcing that the battle had been won. However, the Russians continued

to resist, and as the autumn mud began to slow down the German tanks, their advance came to a halt. This precious time allowed Soviet commanders to hurry new formations and Siberian divisions and tanks, experienced in winter warfare, to the frontline. As the ground hardened, the Germans renewed their attack but were repelled by the new troops, who managed to push them back 200 miles.

By 5 December the Germans had advanced 1,050 miles into Russia, were camped on the outskirts of Leningrad and Moscow, and had killed or captured millions. However, despite getting to within 20 miles of Moscow, the capture of the city had failed, giving Stalin his first victory of the war. Hitler's grand plan had produced incredible results, but failed in his ultimate goal of forcing Russia to surrender. Now with a bitter winter setting in, his completely unprepared troops were left to suffer and perish in the cold, while plans were drawn up for continuing with the war on the Eastern Front.

Though the Soviets had survived, their losses of men and equipment were staggering. Though more tanks, artillery and aircraft were being hurriedly built, the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who lay dead on the battlefields and the three million taken prisoner couldn't easily be replaced. Tragically, for those who surrendered, the USSR had not signed the Geneva Convention, which ensured prisoners of war were treated humanely. This played into Hitler's warped ideology, and many were used for slave labour or starved to death in appalling conditions.

The prisoners' 75 million countrymen who were now under German rule suffered just as badly at the hands of their new masters. This was a war of ►

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***Snowed in:*** A Wehrmacht soldier guards a village, armed with a grenade and gun. He is one of over 4.5 million Axis power troops during the invasion of the USSR

Getty Images



## THE EASTERN FRONT

extermination, with Hitler's Aryan, northern European troops looking to obliterate the Slavic race, and the many Jewish communities who lived among them. As units of SS moved in behind the frontline soldiers, atrocities started to occur all over the country. Food was taken, leaving entire communities to starve, while partisans who waged guerrilla warfare against the invaders were crushed and left to hang as warnings. Jews, Slavs and other minorities were massacred in their millions, either in systematic genocide in the death camps that followed or in random acts of murder committed by the Nazis.

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However, it wasn't just the Germans who were responsible for the hell that was inflicted on the people of the western Soviet Union. To prevent anything falling into the hands of the advancing German army, Stalin ordered a scorched earth policy, where destruction battalions levelled towns, took food and livestock, and executed anyone who displayed even the slightest inclination of anti-Soviet feeling. As the people of the Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus looked forward to the Germans liberating them from Stalin's oppression, tens of thousands were murdered by the NKVD. In this terrible fight the previous rules and principles of war were savagely ignored by both sides.

Though perhaps no exact figure will ever be uncovered, the number of civilians who died on the Eastern Front, either through war, starvation or murder, may be upwards of 20 million. Not only was it to be the greatest war ever fought in terms of the numbers of troops, but also in the appalling casualties suffered by both sides and among the innocent lives squandered in its apocalyptic wake. ■

**Ready for battle:** A Heavy Panzer Platoon (Abteilung 503, Pzkw III) has been rushed to the Stalingrad theatre. The German offensive ended in complete failure



Ullstein - A. Grimm









Mondadori via Getty Images

**Defending the city:** Russian soldiers attack a German tank in Stalingrad (now Volgograd)





# STALINGRAD: THE TURNING OF THE TIDE

## HOW THE RUSSIANS WENT FROM THE BRINK AT STALINGRAD TO TAKE THE FIGHT BACK TO THE GERMANS

**I**n spring 1942, as the summer snows melted and the mud dried up, the German army prepared to regain the initiative they'd lost in the blizzards outside Moscow the previous winter. While Soviet troops concentrated on holding on to the capital and retaking Leningrad, Hitler approved a plan to push towards the oil fields of the Caucasus that Russian industry was so dependent on.

Codenamed Case Blue, the operation was intended to take both the Don River and carry on towards the Caucasus Mountains, and also capture the Volga River to the east that was vital for Soviet supplies from the Caspian Sea to the northern theatre.

Code Blue started well for the Germans, as they decisively won the battles of Kharkov and Voronezh on the Don from May to July, again encircling vast Red Army formations, before beginning the difficult capture of the mountains. However, the real thrust headed east to the city which bore the name of the Soviet Premier himself, Stalingrad. The German 6th Army reached Stalingrad on 23 August and immediately began pummeling the city with the help of the massive Luftflotte 4 division of the Luftwaffe. Soon Stalingrad was reduced to a mound of rubble, thinly supplied across the Volga by barges and ferries that were constantly attacked from the air.

For the rest of the summer and autumn both sides fought in one of the most brutal engagements of the entire war.

Among them were thousands of civilians who couldn't be evacuated, and scratched an existence amongst the carnage. The Germans reached the river in the north and south of the city at the end of August, and proceeded to squeeze the Russian salient, taking one building at a time. Despite only possessing a few tanks, no aircraft and just 20,000 men, the Red Army made the Germans pay for every house they took, holding on determinedly to their small patch of the city, sucking more and more German forces into the heart of the battle. When victory seemed inevitable for Hitler's forces, the Russians unleashed a surprise counteroffensive.

### TIGHTENING THE NOOSE

The Soviet Generals Zhukov and Vasilevsky recognised that to the north and south of the city, the German line was held by Italian, Hungarian and Romanian units that had failed to prove themselves in battle.

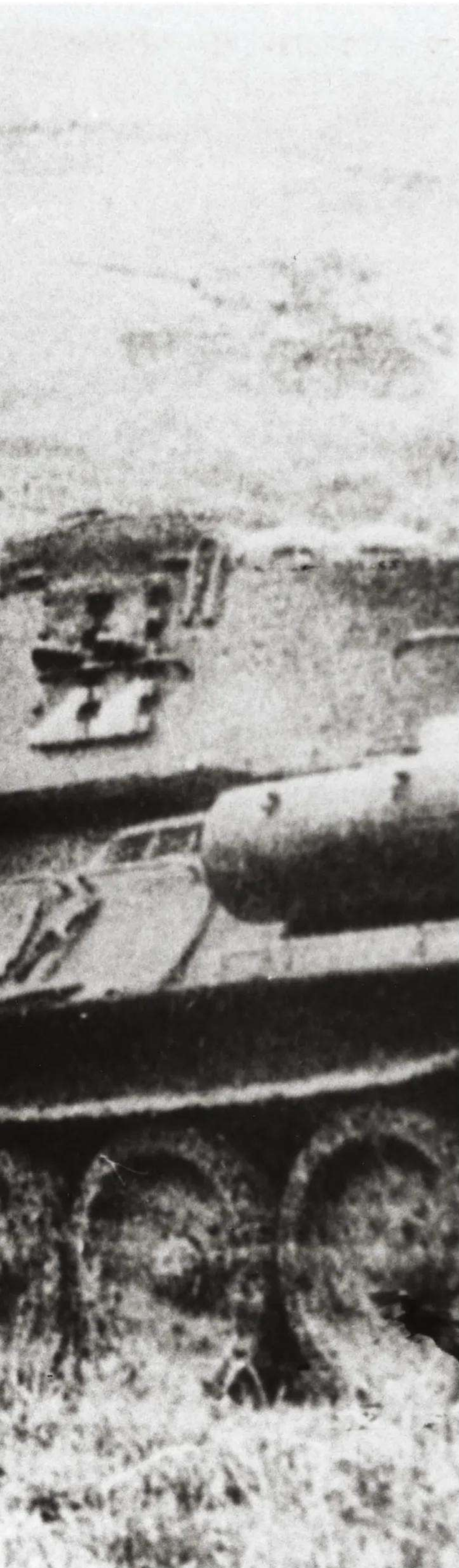
On 19 November to the north and 20 November at the south, Operation Uranus was launched over the Volga by two formations that smashed through the flanks, meeting up on 23 November at Kalach. The 6th Army that had suffered for each street it had taken was now surrounded by the Red Army. Over the ►



***Tank attack:*** Red Army soldiers and Soviet T-34 tanks on the attack during the Battle of Kursk in July 1943







next two months the noose was tightened on the starving men of the 6th Army until finally, on 2 February 1943, General Paulus surrendered to the Soviets, leading 91,000 of his men into captivity, of which only 6,000 survived.

The defeat at Stalingrad was a disaster for Hitler, and gave fresh impetus to his Soviet foes, who continued to take back land lost during the previous summer by capturing the city of Kursk among others. This led to a salient in the Soviet lines that the German army planned to attack. However, delays in waiting for new tanks allowed the Soviets to heavily fortify its defensive positions with minefields, anti-tank ditches and heavy weapons, while also positioning hundreds of thousands of men and machines around the salient to quickly act when the attack came.

When Operation Citadel was launched on 5 July 1943 it led to perhaps the biggest military engagement in history, as nearly one million Germans fought two million Russians for control of the Kursk salient. After just 11 days and on the cusp of breaking through the Russian defences, the German offensive was halted, with troops pulled back to the starting line to await the Russian counterattacks that came on 12 July. Named after the general who had helped save the nation from Napoleon in 1812, Operation Kutuzov delivered a decisive victory for the Russians at Kursk. Whereas Stalingrad had shocked Germany, it was the loss of men and vehicles at Kursk that ensured Germany was not able to conduct any more offensives on the Eastern Front, and it was now Stalin's forces that would go on the attack, take back their country and make Hitler's men suffer.

A major factor for the Soviet revival was the sheer weight of its industrial output. In the face of the German advance in 1941, thousands of factories from Belarus and the Ukraine were evacuated to beyond the Ural mountains to continue production. The figures speak for themselves, with the all-important production of tanks and self-propelled guns increasing from just under 7,000 units in 1941, to over 24,000 in both 1942 and 1943, even eclipsing Germany's output. While the Wehrmacht forces had the benefit of the awesome Panther and Tiger tanks, there were far too many models on the Eastern Front, which all required separate parts and often suffered during the cold Russian winter – a fate which afflicted much of its equipment. Meanwhile the simplicity of the mass-produced Russian T-34 tanks,

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aircraft and AK47 assault rifles meant they were very reliable and easy to fix, and flooded the battlefields of the Eastern Front from 1942 onwards.

Though the Red Army had vast resources of men, tanks and crucially fuel from its vast oil fields to call on, the Soviets were also well-supplied by their British and American allies. In the early months of the war the British sent both aircraft and pilots to help defend Murmansk in the north and train new pilots, while tanks from Britain and Canada crucially helped the Russians before they were able to increase production of their own vehicles. However, it was the introduction of the industrial powerhouse of the United States that really helped the Soviets, with over 100,000 trucks as well as tanks, aircraft and millions of tonnes of food being delivered after its entry to the war at the end of 1941.

## MASSIVE LOSSES

The loss of Smolensk and Kiev meant that by the end of 1943 the Germans had been pushed back eastwards of the Dnieper River, and faced defending a vast front that stretched from the Black Sea to the Baltic. Though the German troops and vehicles were more than a match for their Red Army opponents, the sheer magnitude of their losses in the disasters of 1943 meant that they were overwhelmingly outnumbered. Just as the world had been awe struck by how far the Wehrmacht had advanced during the initial months of Barbarossa in 1941, the massive gains made by the rejuvenated Red Army during 1944 were unprecedented. As the Western Allies endured a torturous slog up the mountains of Italy and rejoiced as their forces landed in Normandy, only to be slowed down by the German defence, the Soviets were ►



## THE EASTERN FRONT

reconquering vast swathes of land against the majority of Hitler's forces. Battles such as Hube's Pocket and the Dnieper-Carpathian Offensive resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths in both armies, but the Russians were quick to replace entire formations as they threw more and more men against the retreating Germans. In this meat grinder the irreplaceable elite of the Wehrmacht were cut down in their swathes, and couldn't be replaced nearly as effectively as the Russians with their vast resources of manpower. As the German army and its allies slowly collapsed, entire countries fell back under Soviet influence, with the Ukraine and Crimean peninsula falling in early 1944; Belorussia, Lithuania and East Poland by the summer; and most dramatically of all, Romania, Bulgaria and most of Hungary by the end of the year.

One of the most shameful episodes of the Russian advance was in August 1944 as it approached the Polish capital Warsaw, which had been under vicious occupation since September 1939. With the Red Army approaching and the Germans fleeing, the Polish Resistance rose up to finally overthrow their hated oppressors. Within days the tens of thousands of brave fighters, armed with just rifles and machine guns, took control of the centre of the city, but as they waited for Red Army tanks to roll through the streets to join them they were instead met by the SS. The Soviets had inexplicably stopped at the city limits and did nothing as the Uprising was ruthlessly crushed, with the city being all but levelled and nearly 200,000 civilians killed. Even British and American air drops to aid the Resistance were given no help by Stalin, who most likely wished for nothing to oppose his plans to turn Poland into a satellite state of the expanding USSR.

### LENINGRAD LIES IN RUINS

It wasn't until 27 January 1944 that Leningrad was finally relieved from the siege that had begun in the first few months of Barbarossa. Though the Road of Life over Lake Ladoga brought in supplies and evacuated civilians in both summer and winter when it was frozen, it was far too little for the population that was bombed and starved out for an agonising 872 days. By the time Soviet forces broke the lines around the city, over 1.5 million civilians and soldiers had died, making it the costliest siege in history. The ruins of Leningrad would give the Red Army even greater fuel for vengeance when it finally stepped foot on German soil a few months later, with equally horrific results.

It wasn't just the Germans and Poles who were to suffer the Red Army's wrath. The Soviet propaganda machine that had given soldiers backbone in the darkest days of Barbarossa, ensured that even their ordinary comrades, who had been among the armies whose commanders had surrendered earlier in the war, were treated as traitors. As those prisoners who had survived the brutal conditions of their German captors awaited liberation from Stalin's rampaging forces, their hopes were cruelly dashed as they were interrogated and even shot. The survivors were then marched back to Russia in their hundreds of thousands, where many ended up being sent to the horrendous Gulag camps in Siberia, or executed. This wasn't just the fate of Russians who had committed massacres against their homeland under the banner of the German army. Men who had simply been captured or shot down as they flew above the battlefields also suffered appalling treatment by Stalin's hordes and the merciless NKVD. Women who had been previously taken prisoner by the German forces were treated just as badly, and there were countless incidents of rape.

Nearly 2.5 million Soviet prisoners died in German concentration camps or as slave labour, out of just over 4 million captured during the conflict. However, it was other camps discovered by the Soviets, as well as the Americans and British as they advanced in the west, which showed the most depraved cruelty of the Nazi regime. In January 1945 Red Army troops uncovered a series of camps around the Polish town of Auschwitz, finding around 7,000 sick, skeletal prisoners on the brink of starvation. These were the final occupants of the Auschwitz camps, where millions of Jews, Russian PoWs, Poles and other minorities were worked to death, starved, killed by disease, experimented on or systematically murdered in gas chambers and ovens by the SS. Around 58,000 that had survived had been evacuated and marched west to Germany to prevent the Russians uncovering what had happened, while records and buildings were also destroyed. Those found by the Red Army were those deemed too sick or weak to go on the death march, which claimed the lives of a further 38,000 people. As more camps were discovered around Germany and Poland and the true nature of the Holocaust was revealed, it became clear that Hitler's sickening ideology made even the brutal horrors of the Eastern Front pale in comparison. ■

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**Resistance:** German soldiers fighting against the Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa), during the Warsaw Uprising













# BERLIN: THE FINAL BATTLE

BERLIN WAS THE SCENE OF THE FINAL, BLOODY  
CONFLICT IN THE WORLD'S MOST HORRIFIC WAR

**I**n January 1945, General Paulus, commander of the 6th Army that had been so emphatically defeated at the crucial Battle of Stalingrad, was languishing in Soviet captivity. The prison he was held in was bugged by the NKVD, and he was overheard saying: "It is now two years since the Stalingrad catastrophe, and now the whole of Germany is becoming a gigantic Stalingrad."

Even by the standards of the battle that had helped swing the war in the Soviets' favour, typified by appalling street fighting, the final battle for Germany in the last months of World War II would result in cataclysmic suffering. The seemingly unstoppable Red Army were prepared to throw everything at an enemy prepared to fight to the death.

In January, the Germans were surrounded on all sides, and had lost fuel, armour, aircraft and 80,000 of some of the army's finest men trying to break the Allies during the Ardennes Offensive. Meanwhile the Red Army had amassed a staggering 6.7 million men on a front that stretched all the way from the Baltic to the Adriatic.

In desperation the German High Command had rapidly enlisted men deemed too old or unfit for service to fight in the Volkssturm Home Guard alongside young fanatics of the Hitler Youth. They were quickly trained and equipped with the simple but deadly Panzerfaust anti-

tank rocket launcher and the rifles that were still pouring off the production lines despite the loss of factories to Allied bombings and advances. But this was still not enough to take on the imposing might of Russian forces.

Heinz Guderian, Chief of the General Staff, warned Hitler of the impending breakthrough and the need to divert troops from the Western Front, where the Allies were still clearing up remnants of the Battle of the Bulge, in order to strengthen the eastern defences. However, his advice was ignored by Hitler.

The first major attack of the year was launched by 1st Belorussian and 1st Ukrainian Fronts at 5am on 12 January over the frozen River Vistula in Poland, ►

EVEN THE UPPER  
ECHELONS OF THE  
SOVIET COMMAND  
HAD LITTLE  
GRASP OF WHAT  
CONSTITUTED  
ACCEPTABLE  
BEHAVIOUR

**Red front:** A Soviet armoured division of the 3rd Belorussian Front attacking the Germans in East Prussia, January 1945



## THE EASTERN FRONT

the penultimate natural barrier between the Russians and the prized target of Berlin. Marshal Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front smashed through resistance while two tank armies targeted the industrial regions of Silesia that were still vital to the flagging German war effort. The crossing opened the way for the Soviets to advance all over their front. In the north of Germany, 3rd Belorussian Front attacked East Prussia while Marshal Rokossovsky's 2nd Belorussian Front swept north. Such was the rapid advance of the T-34 tanks that by 23 January East Prussia was virtually cut off from the rest of Germany, as the Red Army inflicted devastation like that it had experienced in the vast encirclements of 1941.

The Germans knew survival was but a slim hope: either they'd die fighting or in captivity, so most chose to make the former last as long as was possible. Only as late as 20 April did the Stavka acknowledge that a change in attitude was needed to soften the blow being dealt out by the desperate defenders.

In another mirroring of 1941, the great Wehrmacht continued to strike fear into its foes by desperate orders from on high. Heinrich Himmler, who yearned to be a great commander but whose talents instead lay in the murder of millions, imitated Stalin's "Not one step back" order to his troops. The German armies desperately fought off any attack, but with nowhere to go they soon found themselves surrounded, and hamstrung by the constraining orders they had been given.

A message to Army Group Centre on 15 April from Berlin ominously stated: "Every village and town shall be defended and held by every possible man. Every German who contravenes his obvious natural duty will forfeit his honour and his life."

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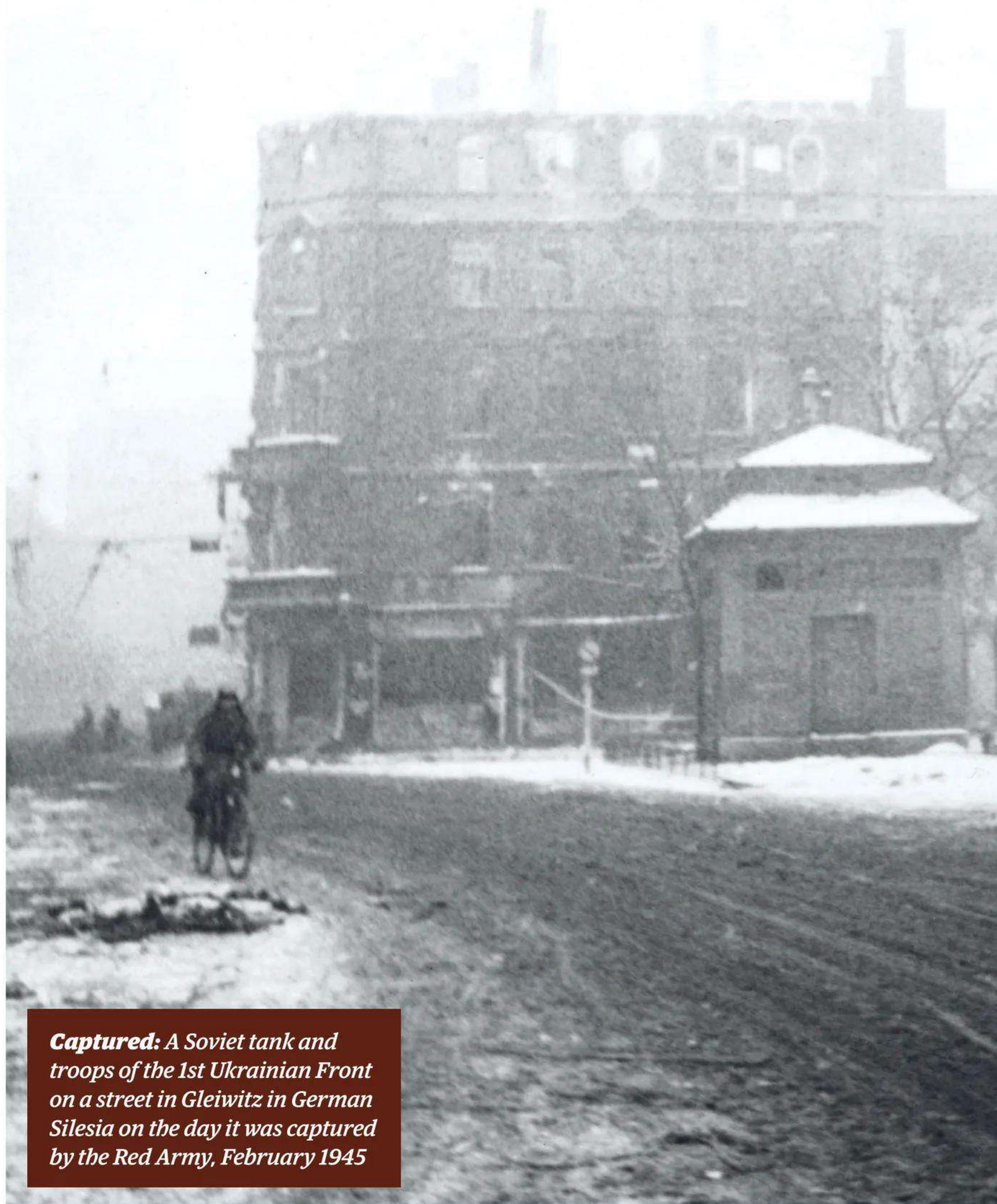
### DESTRUCTION

In the last week of January, the valuable industrial area of Silesia was completely secured by the Soviets. This was a monumental disaster for Germany – the mines and factories that had kept them in the fight with their production of raw materials and weapons were now lost.

However, the plan for the Soviets to make use of the crucial industrial area was hampered by the rampages and atrocities carried out by frontline troops and the suspicious NKVD, who came in their wake to deal with suspected enemies. It resulted in the deaths of skilled workers and destruction of vital materials that were needed to rebuild the Russian homeland, which lay in tatters following four years of war.

Stalin acted quickly and issued an order to gather all German men from the ages of 17 to 50 to form labour battalions to be sent to west Russia to repair the war damage caused by their countrymen. The cruel use of slave labour that had been employed by Germany when it was in its ascendancy was now being engaged by its conquerors. Stalin also insisted that more care was taken to ensure the scientists and the uranium employed in the German attempts to build a nuclear weapon be brought back to Russia. Stalin was all too aware of the need to quickly catch up with the US's Manhattan Project.

The major destruction of land and towns and the rumours of brutal treatment of civilians at the hands of Red Army soldiers led to millions fleeing



**Captured:** A Soviet tank and troops of the 1st Ukrainian Front on a street in Gleiwitz in German Silesia on the day it was captured by the Red Army, February 1945



their communities for the ports. Those lucky enough to have a car or get on a train managed to escape quickly, but the majority were forced to walk with their belongings in heavy snow as temperatures plummeted to  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  at night.

Even though Berlin was being bombed continually by Allied aircraft and targeted for destruction by the Soviets, it seemed the people, with nowhere else to go and little hope of making it out of the country by any means, fled en masse to the German capital, with upwards of 50,000 refugees arriving in the city daily by the end of January.

As Rokossovsky's forces cleared East Prussia they trapped 1.5 million refugees in the port of Danzig, in awful conditions. The barbaric sight of men hanging from lamp posts was the responsibility of the SS and military police, who executed troops that had abandoned their positions. Earlier in the war, Soviet political officers had carried out the practice with equal ruthlessness

among their troops to prevent any retreat, and here and across the rest of the frontlines it was employed to prevent anyone else who might disobey the calls to 'Fight to the last'. Even in the face of impossible odds, those that had got Germany into this mess were still using terror tactics to urge people to fight on.

As the soldiers held off the Russian attacks, thousands crammed aboard the last ships to leave Germany, and it was here that the greatest maritime disaster in history unfolded. On 30 January a Soviet submarine set its sights on the cruise liner Wilhelm Gustloff, which had just set sail from Danzig. Three torpedoes caused the ship to sink in just 40 minutes, and in the confusion 7,400 of the 8,000 refugees onboard perished in the freezing waters.

This sadly was just one of many incidents where ships were sunk with appalling loss of life. On 12 February the hospital ►





ship General von Steuben was torpedoed, killing nearly all of the 2,680 wounded onboard, while in May the liner SS Cap Arcona, made up to look like a warship, was attacked by British RAF aircraft. Little did they know that the ship was filled with explosives and prisoners of concentration camps who the Germans were still trying to dispose of. As the ship sank survivors were gunned down by German soldiers on the shore.

Refugees also suffered appalling losses in the city of Dresden in south-eastern Germany. Swollen by 300,000 people escaping the Russians, the city was bombed by over 1,000 aircraft of the combined RAF and USAF between 13 and 15 February. They bore the brunt of casualties in the resultant firestorm that tore through the city, reducing it to rubble and killing over 20,000.

Although the Allied bomb offensive continued unabated, it had little impact on the Soviet juggernaut, which continued to roll through Eastern Europe. Key bridgeheads secured on the banks of the River Oder accelerated the advance, and Stalin ordered Marshal Zhukov of the 1st Belorussian Front to rein in his advance on 25 January as the Russians were just 150km from the 2nd Belorussian flanks. The Poles exacted their revenge on German troops, and the River Oder was crossed at the end of January; the news of both events spread quickly throughout Berlin.

Eventually, four months after the Russians sat back and watched the destruction of Warsaw as it rose up and was crushed by the SS, the Red Army finally cleared what was left of the Polish capital on 20 January. Wherever Polish prisoners and civilians were liberated, the Army carried out their own brutal reprisals against the German oppressors, with many executing their prisoners before the

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Russian generals even had the chance to interrogate them.

While the armies of Zhukov and Konev continued the relentless push forward, eventually liberating Krakow, Marshal Chernyakhovsky and Rokossovsky's two fronts of armies were still dealing ruthlessly with the small pockets of defiant German forces that had been left in their wake. One target remained: Berlin.

By the time of the Yalta Conference in early February 1945, Russian tanks were just 40 miles from the outskirts of Berlin, and even though it had not been formally agreed at that point, it looked certain that it would be the Red Army that would be given the keys to the city.

The meeting on the Crimea was attended by all three leaders of the major Allied nations, with Churchill and Roosevelt arriving first by plane, and Stalin the next day by train due to his fear of flying. Although the meeting was to decide the fate of Germany after the war, the question of who would reach Berlin first, which would lie in the Soviet sector, was still unanswered by the end of the meeting.

### OUTNUMBERED

As Britain and America failed to deal swiftly with the few remaining German troops to the west, Stalin became more madly driven to make sure the Soviets hoisted the red banner over Berlin. However, he was indebted to his allies, for the struggle to keep the Allies on the west bank of the Rhine tied up valuable formations, leaving Germany open to Zhukov and Konev's winter offensive. The Red Army vastly outnumbered the Germans at five to one, and very quickly overpowered them.

Even as late as 1 April, after receiving the Allied representatives, Stalin informed Supreme Commander Eisenhower that Berlin was in fact a secondary target for his forces. However, on the same day at a meeting in the Kremlin, he posed to Konev and Zhukov the idea that the race for Berlin was still on, and they both accepted that it was a race that had to be won by the Red Army.

To ensure that the city fell as soon as possible, he pitted Zhukov's 1st Belorussian Front against Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front, dangling the prized carrot of Berlin in front of them. Both fronts were an equal distance from the city and were to be involved in the plan to seize it, with a mass manoeuvre that would surround the last remnants of the Wehrmacht, which were being

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EVEN THOUGH IT  
HAD NOT BEEN  
FORMALLY AGREED,  
IT LOOKED  
CERTAIN THAT IT  
WOULD BE THE RED  
ARMY THAT WOULD  
BE GIVEN THE  
KEYS TO THE CITY  
-----

assembled to make sure Berlin didn't fall without a fight.

Konev's troops were to advance from the south, cutting through Army Group Centre, while Zhukov would secure the formidable Seelow Heights that overlooked the eastern approaches to the city. The 2nd Belorussian Front, under Rokossovsky, was instructed to clean up resistance in the north before closing off any retreat to the west. Zhukov proudly proclaimed the battle would begin on 16 April and that by 22 April, which happened to be Stalin's birthday, the city would be in his hands. The only question remaining was whether he could reach the city before Konev.

On 16 April, the Seelow Heights was lit up by the largest artillery bombardment in history. Zhukov's front had nearly 9,000 pieces of artillery and seven million shells, over one million of which were fired on that day. Those who survived the bombardment were badly shaken, but unfortunately for Zhukov the majority of the shells fell on unmanned positions, inflicting few casualties. His own troops found this out the hard way as they crossed the Oder, with resistance far stronger than expected.

Despite the massive build up only a few boats had been supplied, so the majority of men used whatever they could find to help them stay above the water, with scenes more reminiscent of a sinking ship than a major military operation. As the bedraggled men made it across the river they were easy targets for the defenders, as well as being fired on by their own troops blinded by the fog and smoke, and suffering appalling losses in the minefields. Even when these had been cleared of mines and the tanks reached the Heights, they

*Continued on page 116 ►*



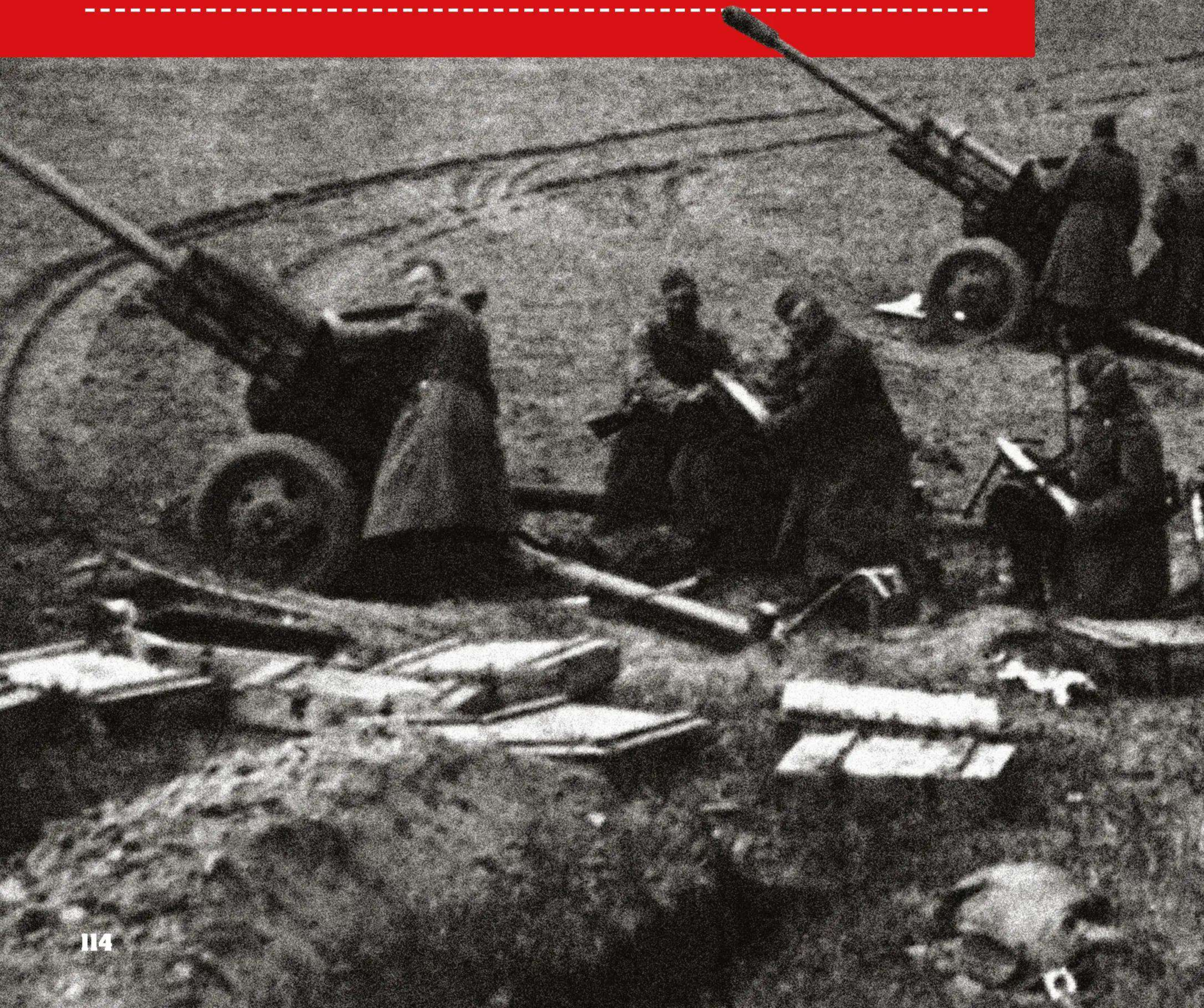
**The Yalta Conference:** Seated left to right: Churchill, FD Roosevelt and Stalin with their respective foreign ministers behind them; Eden, Stettinius and Molotov





# GATES OF BERLIN

BY MID-APRIL 1945 THE RED ARMY WAS LESS THAN 60 MILES OUTSIDE OF THE GERMAN CAPITAL AND CLOSING IN FAST. DESPERATE TO DEFEND THE CITY, APPROXIMATELY 110,000 GERMANS LINED A SERIES OF ENTRENCHMENTS DUG INTO THE SEELOW HEIGHTS AND AWAITED THE SOVIET ONSLAUGHT. ALMOST 1 MILLION MEN OF THE 1ST BELORUSSIAN FRONT PREPARED TO DESCEND UPON THEM, BUT FIRST THEY WOULD PULVERISE THE GERMAN POSITIONS IN A RELENTLESS HAIL OF ARTILLERY FIRE THAT BEGAN ON THE MORNING OF 16 APRIL. ■









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"OBVIOUSLY THE  
WAR WAS LOST,  
BUT THERE WAS  
AN OBLIGATION  
TO DEFEND  
GERMANY."  
-----

MAJOR KARL-GÜNTHER  
VON HASE

*Continued from page 112*

faced a desperately steep ascent while they were being picked off.

Zhukov's underestimation of the difficulty of the battle was underlined further when massive searchlights, intended to illuminate the infantry's crossing and dazzle the enemy, only caused more confusion against the thick smoke and created easy targets. The female troops manning the searchlights were cruelly cut down.

### BLOODSHED

That evening when Zhukov reported to him, Stalin was understandably perturbed. He goaded Zhukov and told him how Konev's assault across the Neisse had been far more successful, with an accurate bombardment and smokescreen used to cover the troops. With his rival across and on his way to Berlin, awaiting the order from Stalin to take the city, Zhukov threw everything he had at the Seelow Heights in a ruthless effort to catch up. There was no subtlety here, just wave after wave of men being thrown at German positions until they broke through. After three days of bloodshed, the 3rd and 5th Shock Armies split German resistance and forces between Wriezen and Seelow, and by 18 April the Heights were in Zhukov's hands. However, not only had his plan to seize Berlin by Stalin's birthday failed but his desperation and pride had cost the lives of 30,000 men.

### RESISTANCE

The 12,000 German deaths, by comparison, displayed the tenacity of the defence. The Soviets seemed convinced that the resistance by Nazis on the Western Front was less than the east. While soldiers began to surrender to the Western Allies, entire German formations in the east fought to the last man. The fate of many units is



unknown, as no one survived and there are no accounts of what befell them. The fight still left in the Germans baffled the Russians, but it was best explained by Major Karl-Günther von Hase, who stated: "I was a professional – I had to do my duty. Obviously the war was lost, but there was an obligation to defend Germany, and a clear distinction between fighting the

Russians and the Western Allies. German behaviour in 1945 reflected a determination not to repeat the experience of 1918, when Germany was not defeated, but gave up."

Such was the difference in the fighting that many Soviets believed the Germans to the west were being ordered to allow Western powers to get to Berlin first. This preposterous rumour was given even



***Slow advance:*** A Soviet armoured division under the command of Lieutenant-General Poluboyarov advancing along the western bank of the River Oder, January 1945



greater fuel by the fact Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS, unsuccessfully attempted to surrender to Britain and America. It was a falsehood that was seized upon by the German high command, who coincidentally gave the defenders even more reason to fight, suggesting that talks with the Allies were underway to swap sides to take on the greater threat of the

dreaded Ivan. German resistance was getting so desperate east of Berlin that suicidal 'selbstopferinsatze' – self-sacrifice missions – aircraft attacks were used in desperate attempts to slow the enemy.

With the breakthroughs, every effort was made by the Germans to assemble as many troops, guns and ammunition as possible to repel the Soviet onslaught. The defence

of Berlin was organised into eight sectors, each commanded by a general or colonel under the overall command of General Heinrich Weidling. However, there was one more person in Berlin who ultimately had the final say of all German movements. Adolf Hitler was adamant about staying in Berlin until the bitter end. The prospect of capturing and killing the Führer who had ►



***The battle for Berlin:***  
*Soldiers of the Russian*  
*army fire from a gun*  
*hidden in a garden*







wrought such devastation on their country gave even more impetus to every man and woman of the Red Army.

Although Stalin's birthday present was unlikely to be Berlin, Hitler's 56th birthday on 20 April was the cue for Zhukov's long-range artillery to fire on Berlin from the suburbs. Conscious that Konev was rapidly advancing from the south, he ordered his commanders to quickly break into the city. His rival on the 1st Ukrainian Front gave similar orders, yet this was easier said than done for the advance units who would now have to fight street by street in the rubble made by the Allied bombing and the renewed artillery bombardment that was being unleashed.

Zhukov above all, who earned his reputation in the victory of Stalingrad, should have appreciated the enormity of the task of taking a city where defenders could hide in buildings and amongst ruins, turning every road and house into a possible ambush.

Even though the defenders only numbered around 85,000 men – half of whom were the elderly untrained men of the Volkssturm – plus 60 tanks, the 1.5 million Russians making their way into the city would be made to bleed for every yard.

To try to counter the bloody defence that they were expecting, Zhukov's forces covered the city with 50 million leaflets saying how futile the fight was for the German soldiers, alongside passes of safe conduct that were to be handed to Russian troops in the event of surrendering.

## **SURRENDER**

Although many would eventually surrender, the price they exacted on the invaders before they did so was enormous. Zhukov's tank armies, that he had sent forward in his rush to be remembered as the man who captured the lion's den, became easy targets for the mobile defenders. Barricades were thrown up in the streets if only to offer token resistance and draw the fire of the T-34s as they rumbled down the streets. The specialised Waffen SS instead occupied basements and side alleys, and pounced on isolated units and tanks when their attention was drawn, before retreating.

In this deadly game of cat and mouse the Russian commanders became increasingly desperate and agitated, often using Katyusha rockets to blast away an entire block if a tank was lost. They soon realised this didn't work, and what was needed was instead the more precise tactic

*Continued on page 122 ►*



# A REICH IN RUINS

EXHAUSTED FROM WEEKS OF BRUTAL FIGHTING ON THE RUBBLE-STREWN STREETS OF BERLIN, TRIUMPHANT SOVIET TROOPS GATHER IN FRONT OF THE BRANDENBURG GATE. ONCE A SYMBOL OF TEUTONIC MIGHT, BY MAY 1945 IT WAS A BULLET-RIDDEN MONUMENT TO THE FAILURE OF THE THIRD REICH'S GENOCIDAL WAR SURROUNDED BY BURNED-OUT VEHICLES AND CORPSES. ■









## THE EASTERN FRONT

*Continued from page 119*

of using infantry to clear each building by hand and mobile howitzers to blast away more robust defences, before the vulnerable T-34s could be used to advance on the centre.

The fighting between houses became savage as troops fought across rooftops, throwing grenades through windows before strafing them with bullets. Cellars were cleared out, often with flamethrowers. The inexperienced men of the Red Army were forced to learn close quarters combat quickly, and many were simply too scared and exhausted from their march on the city to take on the famed Waffen SS troops. Despite the overwhelming numbers, many Russian recruits, as had been the case throughout the war, had gone through only basic training and weren't adequately equipped. Konev's officers reported mass cases of 'cowardice' and self-inflicted wounds from men forced into the maelstrom with no previous experience of the horrors of the Eastern Front.

Many also became paranoid about German soldiers discarding their uniforms, springing their ambushes and hiding among civilians sheltering in bunkers and basements. Often when Red Army troops came across men in such situations they were viciously interrogated or shot out of hand, much to the protests and screams of the onlookers. Others simply covered up the entrances to bunkers and shot anyone who tried to escape.

As the two Russian fronts moved closer to the city centre, more and more casualties among their ranks were caused by friendly fire. Although the majority were accidental, there was a fierce rivalry from the generals at the top to the troops at the bottom to reach the Reichstag ahead of the other. Any setback was met with rage while news of the other's progress was even more exacerbating. One corps commander of Zhukov's forces even moved burnt

MANY WERE PARANOID ABOUT GERMAN SOLDIERS DISCARDING THEIR UNIFORMS AND HIDING AMONG CIVILIANS



**Street fighting:** Soviet soldiers run past a dead German during the battle for Berlin

out tanks to block streets where Konev's formations were advancing, commenting that "there's nothing more depressing in Berlin than learning about the success of your neighbour". This black humour was understandably lost on the city's inhabitants, who were to experience far worse.

Among the carnage, the millions of the city's civilians and refugees had to survive the best they could. Those who hadn't been enlisted to fight off the Russians either remained in their homes, if still standing, crammed into cellars, or headed for the overcrowded subway stations and bunkers that doubled as hospitals. Despite the proud proclamations of a defence of the city that would resonate through history and even the hope of being helped by the Western powers, even the most hardened National Socialist saw little light at the end of the tunnel. Even if they survived, the rumours reaching them of the merciless treatment of women in East Prussia escalated the feelings of helplessness and impending doom. The majority of casualties were due to shelling, either hitting and collapsing houses, or out in the street. Making a dash outside for water or to join the bread line became a perilous basic task. If a shell burst near a line and killed those queuing, those behind simply shuffled forward and wiped the blood from their ration cards. Death had simply become a matter of course. As food ran low and the water supply ceased, the filthy inhabitants of the city ran out to strip meat

from the dead horses that had been used to pull guns and carts through the streets.

Another horror for civilians was when the tales of the mass rape of women in Germany became a reality. As the frontline units cleared a street and moved on, follow-up waves of units plundered and violated the population en masse. Whereas in East Prussia the revenge for their homeland's destruction had been immediate and primal, the Red Army who entered Berlin were a lot more selective, going into cellars, demanding watches and jewellery, before selecting the younger, more attractive women to be their victims. Although there are cases of well-behaved officers and soldiers treating civilians with compassion, many saw this as a victorious outlet, as they drank and raped unchecked by their superiors, who made examples of only a few perpetrators. It isn't known how many women were raped in Berlin, or how many of those committed suicide as a result. However, the widespread nature of the Russians' reprisals mean the figure is likely to be in the tens of thousands at least.

The city was entirely encircled by 25 April, and just two days later the Germans had been reduced to just a few square miles, which was shelled around the clock. Any soldiers who had abandoned their posts or

*Continued on page 126 ►*

**RIGHT Surrounded:** The Allied forces position themselves around Berlin





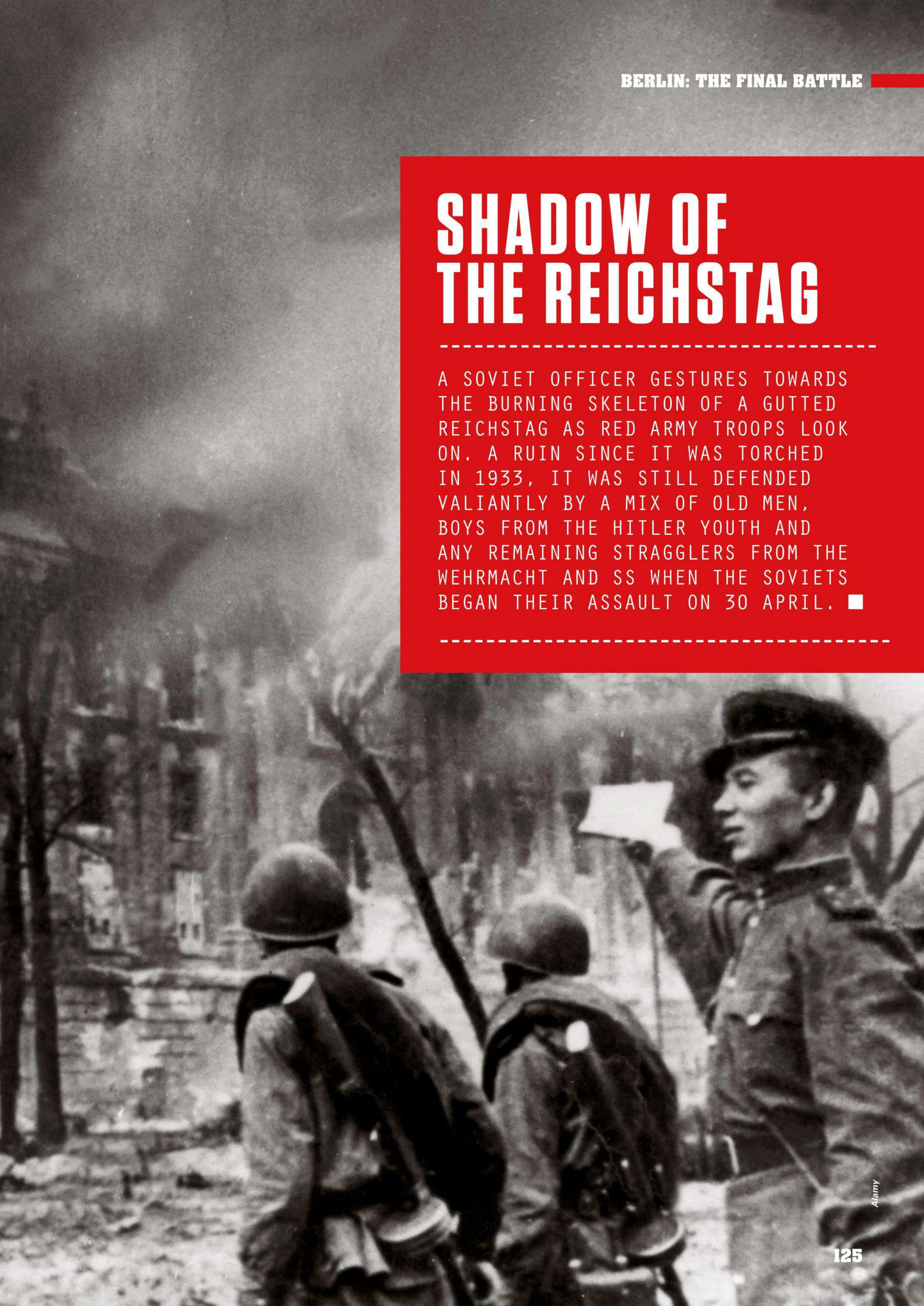






# SHADOW OF THE REICHSTAG

A SOVIET OFFICER GESTURES TOWARDS THE BURNING SKELETON OF A GUTTED REICHSTAG AS RED ARMY TROOPS LOOK ON. A RUIN SINCE IT WAS TORCHED IN 1933, IT WAS STILL DEFENDED VALIANTLY BY A MIX OF OLD MEN, BOYS FROM THE HITLER YOUTH AND ANY REMAINING STRAGGLERS FROM THE WEHRMACHT AND SS WHEN THE SOVIETS BEGAN THEIR ASSAULT ON 30 APRIL. ■





## THE EASTERN FRONT

*Continued from page 122*

bore the white flag of surrender were swiftly dealt with by the SS that still roamed the streets instead of joining the fight.

As the centre drew nearer and nearer, Konev, who had displayed far better skill than the blunt Zhukov, was ordered to stop his troops just 150 yards from the Reichstag on 28 April. It would be left to Zhukov's troops to seize the German parliament and have the honour of flying the Soviet flag above it. The fight for the Reichstag itself was one of the bloodiest episodes of the entire battle, as some 10,000 remaining Germans retreated there to make one last stand.

As wave after wave of Russians rushed the imposing building across open ground they were cut down by machine gun and mortar fire from emplacements inside the building, in the rubble around and from the last remaining gun emplacements in the zoo a mile away. Eventually sheer weight of numbers meant Soviet troops could enter the building and begin the ferocious fighting for each room of the building. In the evening of 30 April, Mikhail Yegorov and Meliton Kantaria of the 756th Regiment climbed up the famous dome and hoisted the flag high in the heat of the battle. However, it would be another two days before the building was completely cleared of defenders, and the scene could be reenacted for the cameras to create the famous propaganda image.

### THE HUNT FOR HITLER

The only prize left was the Nazi leader himself, for which a special NKVD team entered the city on 29 April. They would not have to search for long. Hidden in his bunker not far from the Reichstag, the Führer ranted and raved at his generals for the last few days of the battle for Berlin, demanding counterattacks from units and formations that simply didn't exist. General Weidling had even presented Hitler with a plan to use the remaining German units and tanks to break out and head to the last remaining German positions to the west.

However, Hitler who now feared being taken captive more than dying among the ruins of his Reich, was adamant that he would stay and go down with the ship. Rather than show sadness, he remained defiant until the end, blaming a Jewish conspiracy for forcing him into the war and the poor effort of his army and people for not doing more to win it. He showed no remorse in condemning the entire population to its fate. ►

**Victory:** Red Army soldiers reenact for the camera the raising of the Soviet flag over the Reichstag in Berlin, Germany, on 2 May 1945





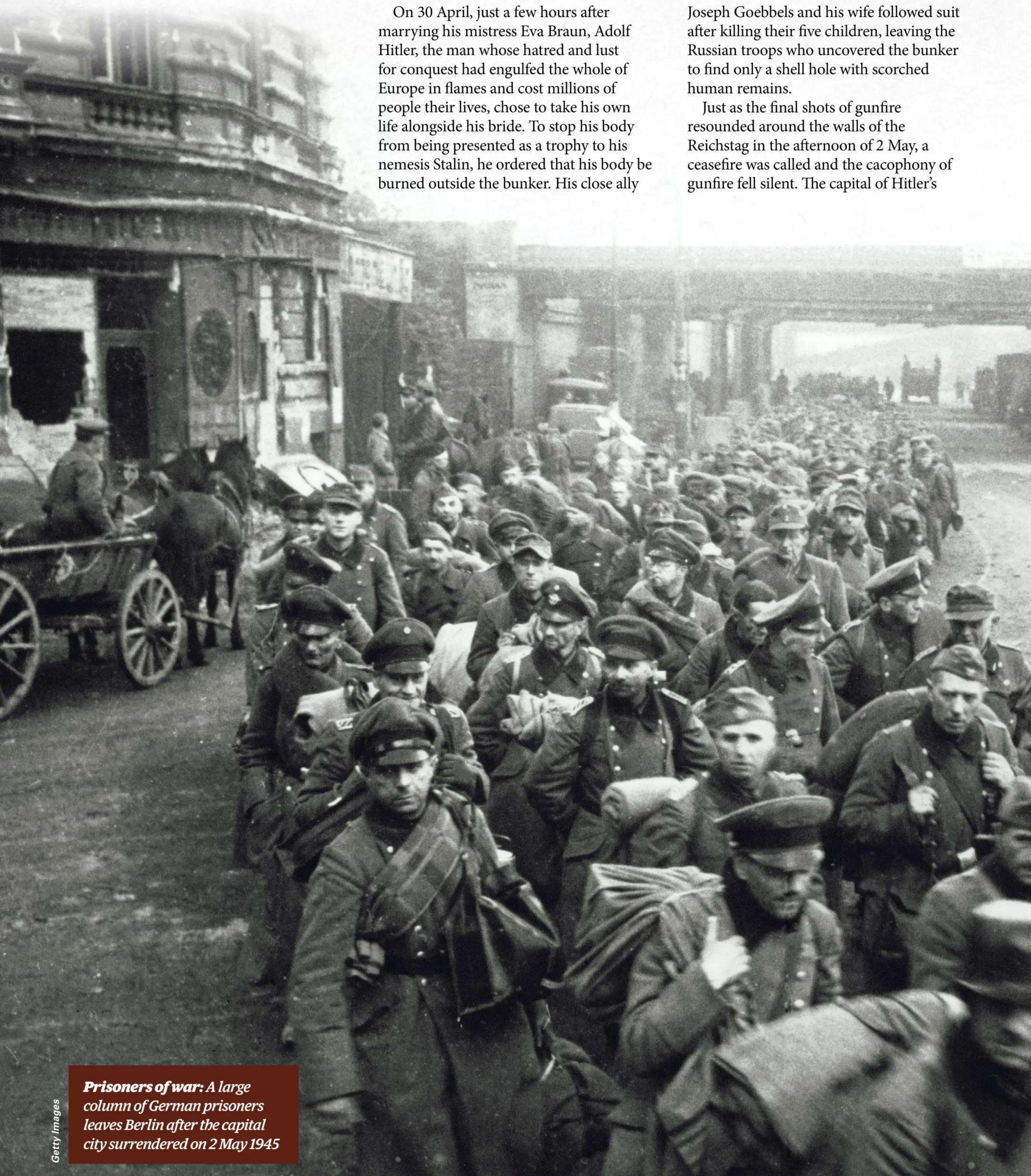




On 30 April, just a few hours after marrying his mistress Eva Braun, Adolf Hitler, the man whose hatred and lust for conquest had engulfed the whole of Europe in flames and cost millions of people their lives, chose to take his own life alongside his bride. To stop his body from being presented as a trophy to his nemesis Stalin, he ordered that his body be burned outside the bunker. His close ally

Joseph Goebbels and his wife followed suit after killing their five children, leaving the Russian troops who uncovered the bunker to find only a shell hole with scorched human remains.

Just as the final shots of gunfire resounded around the walls of the Reichstag in the afternoon of 2 May, a ceasefire was called and the cacophony of gunfire fell silent. The capital of Hitler's



**Prisoners of war:** A large column of German prisoners leaves Berlin after the capital city surrendered on 2 May 1945



Third Reich that was supposed to last for 1,000 years was a smouldering ruin, marked by shattered buildings, and the corpses of men, women and children. All around Russian Bolsheviks, who Hitler had deemed inferior, were celebrating in the streets or taking their prizes of those women the Führer had called 'mothers of the Fatherland'. In all 125,000 Berliners had died, alongside some 100,000 Russian

casualties and the majority of the city's 80,000 defenders, making that short battle one the bloodiest of the entire war.

All along the Western and Eastern fronts, the major cities conquered by the Third Reich continued to fall to the Allies. While some succumbed without much of a fight, some of the bloodiest fighting of the war continued as the diehard fanatics of Hitler's regime held to the philosophy of kill or be

killed. Budapest fell on 13 February, while it took Vienna ten days of bloody fighting before it was taken on 14 April.

The most determined German units that fought on to the bitter end, the fanatics and especially young members of the Hitler Youth, continued to resist even after being taken prisoner and after the final surrender. It was many of these units that formed the dreaded Werewolf squads that continued to operate a guerrilla war in the name of Nazism throughout the summer of 1945, although they numbered far fewer than the Allies had feared.

The end of the war was also a chance for the troops of the British, American and Russian armies to meet, which the US and USSR troops did for the first time on 25 April at Torgau on the Elbe. However, things were far from appreciative between the two Allies, with both realising that relations between the leaders were chilly, especially concerning what was to become of Europe after the war. US Army field commander Omar Bradley in particular was concerned about the atrocities being committed by the Red Army to the east. Still smarting from being denied the chance to assault Berlin, he pleaded with Eisenhower to try to rush to Prague to save it from the Russians, who had sustained 50,000 casualties within five days of fighting. Before they arrived the Czechs rose up and were again met by the cowardice and murder of the SS, and now faced further vengeance from the Red Army. Bradley's request was denied and the scenes that had marred the Eastern Front played out again in another European capital.

Since the surrender of Berlin the end of the war was expected any day, but though approaches had been made by the German military commanders to the US generals, only an unconditional surrender of all German forces to both the Western allies and the USSR would be accepted. This was eventually signed by General Alfred Jodl at Eisenhower's headquarters in France on 7 May. Everywhere across Europe men laid down their arms in celebration or defeat, while scenes of jubilation erupted in the capitals and major cities all over the world on 8 May, which was proclaimed Victory in Europe, or VE Day.

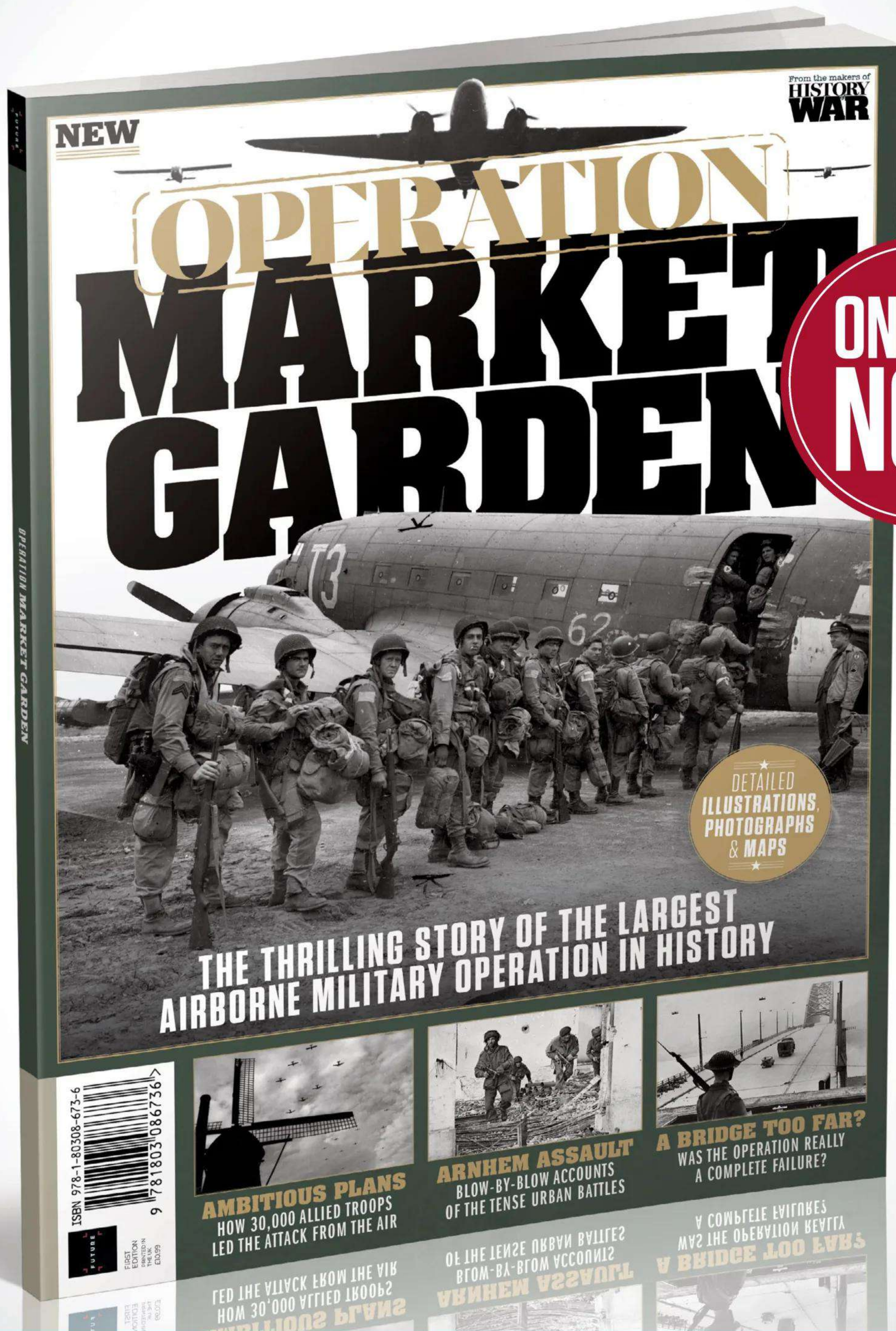
Still the suffering dragged on as wounded soldiers, civilians and prisoners continued to be treated, while many were enduring the beginning of their captivity in the hands of the Red Army. The most destructive conflict in world history upheld its deadly reputation to the bitter end and beyond. ■





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**RELIVE**  
THE DEFINING  
MOMENTS OF THE  
LAST DAYS OF  
THE WAR IN  
EUROPE



## THE FINAL BATTLE

